



State of the Headphone Hobby

January 2012 through September 2012

**The state of the
headphone hobby remains
~~mostly boring and uninspired~~
ghastly so far for 2012, but
there are glimmers of hope.**

**"WHY DO YOU THINK SO MANY TERRIBLE HEADPHONES HAVE BEEN RELEASED
RECENTLY WITH HUGE PRICE TAGS? BECAUSE PEOPLE BUY THEM ANYWAYS."
-RHYTHMDEVILS@HEAD-FI/CHANGSTAR**

Several very expensive (priced from 700-1300 USD) top-of-the-line headphones / IEMs released from big name manufacturers, namely the AKG K3003, Sennheiser HD700, Shure SRH1840, and Denon D7100 have been a huge disappointment. This disappointment only turns into a slap-in-the-face when we realize the immense resources (i.e. engineering talent, sophisticated measuring equipment such as laser interferometers, faraday cages, ground vibration isolation plates, anechoic chambers, etc.) available to such companies to not make bad sounding transducers. It's not that these transducers are bad (actually some of them really are); but rather that they are all horribly overpriced based on their performance. Not all is lost however. Fortunately, we were able to separate some gems from the current pile of elephant dung. Who knows? We can hope that Sennheiser will announce the next coming of the Orpheus before the end of the year.

Now that the dust has settled with the HD700, we are convinced that its "exciting" sound was purely intentional from Sennheiser. From an experienced hobbyist point-of-view, the HD700 is too colored (upper midrange peak similar to Grado, spot-lit treble, recessed midrange) and does not possess nearly enough of the HD800's technical prowess to be priced at 1000 USD. No doubt Sennheiser wanted a fun and exciting sounding headphone priced to compete with the Beyer T1. Only that in this case, fun and exciting sometimes meant painful with certain genres of music. Honestly, if we are going to spend 1000 USD, we would be better off by coughing up a few hundred more to get Sennheiser's top-of-the-line HD800.

Audeze seems to have nailed down the LCD2r2. We've listened to over half a dozen new production LCDr2s and compared them to a few older production r2 units we had lying around. The new production r2s sounded very good with improved clarity and excellent consistency from unit to unit. Anyone interested in an LCD3 should also audition the LCD2 because they are *that* close. The LCD3 has more bass with smoother treble, and it's much more comfortable with those

luxurious squishy pads. Ultimately, it may come down to a matter of preference.

AKG's latest entry into the dynamic headphone space is the closed back K550. At its best, the K550 is mediocre. At its worst, the K550 has severe treble resonances which were painful. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that there may be significant variability with the K550, that some units may exhibit less ringing than others. Still, it's depressing to see AKG take a step backward from the K701, which did not exhibit any appreciable high frequency ringing.

The asinine AKG K3003 "jewelry" commercial which many of you may have seen on YouTube says it all. While many IEMs aficionados, us included, appreciate the bass texture rendered by dynamic IEM drivers, the integration of the dynamic bass driver and balanced armature midrange and treble drivers on the K3003 was poorly implemented. For faster paced music, the bass of the K3003 not only sounded slower in speed, but also seemed to lag behind the treble (reminiscent of a the Martin Logan speakers which mated slow bass drivers with their fast electrostatic panels). In addition, the K3003 exhibited some very audible peaks in the upper midrange and lower treble, which from an engineering point of view, is unacceptable for any multi-driver transducer with a crossover. We can only surmise that AKG's faraday cage or laser interferometer was not working, or their audio engineers were deaf. If you are looking for a luxury top-of-the line universal IEM, the FitEar ToGo! 334 should be considered instead.

The Shure SRH1840 has an upwardly tilted treble response, but it's not that bad tonally. There doesn't appear to be any lower treble ringing which has plagued many headphones. However a listen to the SRH1840 immediately tells us that this 700 USD headphone can hardly be considered in the realm of high-fidelity. The SRH1840 is essentially a full sized iBud. Heck, iBuds don't sound too bad, but they are hardly worth 700 USD.

The SRH1840's bratty little brother, the SRH1440, is simply a disaster not worth talking about.

We are at a loss to explain the Denon D7100 priced at 1200 USD. How does it sound? Let's say the D7100 sounds exactly like what people would expect of Monster Beats. Except that the Beats are probably better. The D7100 has even more bass than the discontinued D2/5/7K, and even more distortion. Again, keep away if you are looking for high-fidelity sound. It seems that Denon is at a loss of what to do without the help of Fostex.

So what's up with these new Shures and Denons sounding like an FM radio out a stock car audio system? It's non-linear distortion. The new Shures and Denons, among other faults, share extremely poor harmonic distortion figures from the midrange down to the bass. Some of the distortion measurements from the InnerFidelity and Effin'Ringin' websites corroborate this. And it's not exactly difficult to hear this distortion ourselves provided we have better references for comparison.

The Fostex TH900 was born out of the partnership between Denon and Fostex for the D2/5/7K headphones. The TH900 can be thought of as Denon D7000 with superior clarity, speed, articulation, and detail retrieval; but with fancier parts and luxurious wood cups. The high frequency ringing heard on the D7000 is much better managed on the TH900. These improvements over the D7000 are significant and should not be discounted. The TH900 is essentially a different headphone. However, many experienced hobbyists may still find the bass too overwhelming and midrange too recessed.

For those wanting a truly neutral closed headphone, look no further than Joe Audio's (<http://joeaudiophile.com/>) Paradox T50RP modification by LFF. Enough said.

We applaud the direction that HiFiMan has taken of bringing us good sounding headphones with appropriate pricing. For 2012, HiFiMan has hit a

home run with the HE400 entry level ortho-dynamic headphone. It's by no means perfect, but it sounds pretty darn good for the price. The HE400 is a little bit sparkly and airy up top, laid back in the upper midrange, and slightly elevated in the bass, but with very high quality bass. At \$400, it's a must audition for those building an entry level or even upper mid-tier system.

The DT1350 belongs in the triumvirate of the supra-aural headphones along with the Sennheiser HD25 and V-Moda M80. Unfortunately, we've noted serious quality control issues (severe left and right driver mismatching) and substantial unit to unit variability far greater than any other headphone regardless of cost. We would love to recommend it, but we cannot tell you how yours is going to sound like. It could be bass light, dark and muddy, or pretty darn good. At least the DT1350 doesn't exhibit the nasty high frequency ringing and distortions found in the other headphones in Beyer's Tesla line. It should be noted that we have also found quality control and consistency issues with the Beyer T1.

The Sennheiser Amperior is what the HD25 should have been in the first place. The release of the Amperior for 350 USD is almost criminal.

Jason Stoddard's "evil" corporation has been bringing us some good Schiit at good prices. For 2012, the Mjolnir head-amp is no exception. There have been hints and whispers that the Mjolnir is better sounding than some other very well known or even legendary solid-state head-amps. The Mjolnir has a very dynamic and involving sound best described by Sir Denis Eton-Hogg of *Audiophile Perspectives Quarterly* (<http://schiit.spreadshirt.com/>)

At 750 USD and a full refund on the table, the Mjolnir is an audition that shouldn't be passed up for anyone looking for a no-fuss solid-state amplifier. The Schiit Gungnir DAC is also slated for release very soon. Based on the developmental units which we have heard, we have high expectations of it.

THE DT1350 SEEMS TO BE LIKE A BOX OF CHOCOLATES.... EXCEPT THEY DON'T COME IN BOXES OF 12 UNITS FOR YOU TO FIND YOUR FAVORITE FLAVOR. —RHYTHMDEVILS@HEAD-FI/CHANGSTAR

INDEED THE SCHIIT MAY APPEAR AT TIMES, DEPENDING UPON THE STRUCTURAL COUNTERPOISE OF ONE'S FAVORED TRANSDUCER, TO BE EVER SO SLIGHTLY DOGMATICALLY VIGILANT IN RENDERING THE TONE COLOUR OF A MULTITUDE OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND HUMAN VOICE. —PURRIN@HEAD-FI/CHANGSTAR

Donald North Audio (<http://www.dnaudio.com>) has finally started to ship the Stratus, a very nice intimate sounding 2A3 amplifier. It is a little bit on the “tubey”, lush, and euphonic side; but it’s tubes done right without sloppiness in the bass or the distortions which give tube amps a bad name. The 2A3 DHT sound must be experienced by everyone at least once in their lifetimes. The Stratus sounds good with the cheap Chinese tubes too.

Finally, Cavalli Audio’s Liquid Lightning and Eddie Current’s upcoming Electra offer us solid-state and all-tube amplifier options respectively for electrostatic headphones. They each provide a unique take of their own which differs from the few pre-existing commercial electrostatic amplifiers already in the market. Amplifier choice was desperately needed for the electrostatic headphone arena, and hopefully the addition of these amplifiers will encourage more hobbyists to enter the world of electrostatic headphones.

Frogbeats has recently entered the IEM market with the C4 (<http://customs.frogbeats.com/>). A few of us have had the opportunity to hear the C4. The C4 has a purity of tone and clarity reminiscent of the EtymoticER-4S but with qualities found in a proper three way custom IEM. At 585 GBP, it’s a must audition for those considering a high-end CIEM, especially if you are across the pond from the USA.

On the portable amplifier front, we were highly impressed by the ALO Audio RXMKIII balanced portable amplifier. It’s almost half the size of a brick though (exaggerating) and extremely expensive to boot. For those with more modest budgets, the MKII version of the Leckerton UHS-6S is an excellent choice.

In conclusion, we are highly disturbed at the continued escalation in headphone prices without corresponding improvements in performance so far in 2012. The big name companies, AKG, Beyer, Denon, Shure, and Sennheiser have been more responsible for this

than anyone else. They should be ashamed of themselves for producing products that don’t perform up to par and according to their price.

But we can’t blame them. We must blame ourselves instead for buying into the hype, wanting instant gratification, or stubbornly maintaining the illusory hope that the next headphone *must* be better, when in fact, all we are doing is embarking on a path of endless side grades.

Don’t buy into the hype. Perform some research (consider positive and especially negative viewpoints, attend meets, borrow friends’ gear). And finally, don’t buy overpriced crap.

Exercise restraint and audition gear in person. If this is not possible, you can always give us pirates enough time to acquire and test the gear on your behalf to possibly save you some money (or at least let you maintain return privileges on big dollar items from Amazon.)

FROGBEATS C4 = EPIC WIN
–LFF@CHANGSTAR

SOME PEOPLE ARE JUST NOT GETTING IT
–DIGITALFREAK@HEAD-FI/CHANGSTAR



The Effin' Ringers
a.k.a.
The Pirates