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High-end headphones

Some say a great pair of headphones can represent the ultimate way to enjoy music – we tested the theory by inviting two high-end £1000 stunners to slug it out in a two-way bout...

NOW ADD THESE...



DON'T EVEN THINK about buying a pair of headphones of this quality without also getting an amplifier capable of getting the best out of them. Headphones have different electrical requirements to speakers, so a dedicated headphone amp like the Lehmann Black Cube Linear (£750, above) will allow them to sound their best.

Clean, dynamic sound

Other amps – such as this unit's Black Cube sibling (£325) or the Graham Slee Novo (£235) are also good performers, but to get the best from a pair of £1000 headphones, this is the one to buy. It has two headphone outputs, too.



This wooden earpiece design is handcrafted from mahogany, and has an upgraded dynamic transducer

Grado GS1000i



£1000

IN THE SEARCH for truly high-end performance, you sometimes have to accept a few eccentricities. These Grados have a couple of their own, but don't be put off – they're worth it.

They're certainly not ugly: the mahogany earpiece design has a

“Guitar is blisteringly real – all six strings delivered with rare accuracy”

homely beauty about it, while the very large foam earcups are designed to create a 'listening room' for your ears (as well as helpfully catering for the larger-lugged among us).

The 'i' version of the GS1000s also have a more stable chassis, along with improvements to the voice coil wire gauge and better damping.

↑ FOR

Extraordinarily open and detailed; clarity and realism, great dynamics

↓ AGAINST

Very leaky, sonically speaking; odd-looking when worn

→ VERDICT

A fabulous pair of cans: they're not for the train, and they don't protect those around you from hearing what you're listening to – but for sheer sonic pleasure they're stunning

Of course, the other aspect of the Grados, which works to produce as clear and uncoloured a sound as possible, is their open-backed design. And while this reduces resonances and unwanted reflections, it also means that a person sitting next to you can hear just about every note of the music you're listening to. If even a small part of your reason for buying headphones is that you want to listen to music without inflicting it on your nearest and dearest, then at the very least try these out before you buy – the GS1000is are very, very leaky.

Superb openness and clarity

But if that's not a problem – and neither is their slightly odd look – you're in for an absolute treat with the GS1000is. Their other idiosyncrasy is that they take an age to run-in: we had them playing constantly for a week before they sounded their best. But when they do, they offer a truly stunning musical performance, with incredible clarity and detail.

Play any music through them, and the first thing you'll notice is the remarkably open, airy treble and upper midrange: voices and instruments float with superb insight and precision. The second is the authenticity of the detail they dig out. Neil Young's acoustic guitar sounds blisteringly real – the vibration of all six strings communicated with rare accuracy.

Their presentation is a little leaner than that of the Sennheisers, although the bass they produce is finely punchy, well-timed and communicative. But where they win out over the HD800s is in their sheer transparency and musical realism: their timing and dynamic sweep combine with detail and insight to deliver your music with a near-perfect fluidity. Sure, the GS1000is are very expensive – they're also extraordinarily good.



Open-backed A closed-back creates internal reflections that disturb sonic clarity – although it also protects those nearby from your penchant for Abba b-sides.

offer sonic glory



This open-backed design uses a large, 56mm diaphragm and a stainless steel transducer

Sennheiser HD800



£1000

THE SENNHEISER HD800 headphones are a very different proposition from the Grados. They look a tad more conventional at first glance, but these are very far from being ordinary 'cans'.

For starters, they use Sennheiser's most advanced driver technology, a

"Neil Young's *Weld* is presented with an admirable clarity"

larger-than-usual 56mm diaphragm and a stainless-steel transducer.

They're also unusual in that they work by directing the sound into your ear at an angle – more like listening to a pair of speakers in a room, in other words.

Like the Grados opposite, the HD800s are designed for performance above all else. And like the Grados, they

↑ FOR

Exceptionally comfortable; good design; solid bass; fine presentation

↓ AGAINST

Beaten by the Grados for realism, openness and insight

→ VERDICT

A very, very fine pair of headphones from Sennheiser, and worth an audition if you don't get on with the Grados

should be approached carefully if you have any need whatsoever to keep your musical enjoyment private (and thereby not annoy the family). Although the open-backed Sennheisers don't leak sound into the room with quite the abandon of the Grados, there's still enough spillage to cause an argument if a loved one is in the same room trying to read the latest 'vampire romance' novel or whatever it is they read these days. And let's face it, when music sounds this good, you won't really want to turn it down.

Clean and clear, with solid bass

The HD800s sound really quite sublime. Bass kicks hard and deep – deeper than the Grados – while there is intense precision and detail on offer. A languid hour of Beethoven *String Quartets* with these on your head is as good a way to waste time as we'd admit to knowing.

Likewise, the punchy, raucous and ragged glory that is Neil Young's live *Weld* album is equally well-represented, with

an admirably pristine way with tonal clarity and rhythmic organisation.

They're comfortable on the ears, too. The big ear cups will fit just about anyone (unless you managed to land a small role in *Star Trek* without the use of make-up), and they're very likeable to use, even over very long listening sessions.

The only thing that counts against the HD800s is that for all their precise clarity, they don't muster the astonishing levels of instrumental realism that the Grados manage. As great as these Sennheisers are, the Grados have an authenticity and openness that makes the HD800s sound, comparatively, slightly sterile.

Make no mistake, though – these are terrific headphones. And if, for some reason, you don't get on with the Grados, these are definitely worth a listen.



Headphone amplifier A special amp (for recommendations, see panel top left), which is designed to suit the specific impedance characteristics of headphones