



# audio



## Grado's New Flagship 'Phones: The Model PS-1000

by Max Dudious

Do you ever have an idea wandering around your head that just avoids everyday classification schemes? It is the most annoying thing. How can you talk to your friends about something if you personally have no conversational "niche" into which it fits? I've been searching for a metaphor to explain how I perceive the new Model PS-1000. That's what has kept me from being more timely in writing about the latest Grado 'phones during this season of gift-giving. But before I get into my mixed metaphor, let me state, unequivocally, these are the *best sounding* Grado 'phones, ever. They can do it all, often sensationally.

The Grado model PS-1000 is like a statistical anomaly that comes up once in a great while, like a great ballplayer who comes along once in a generation or two, like the 5-tool baseball player who can: hit for average and hit for power; play "Golden Glove" defense, with a power-arm; and steal bases at-will, with way above average foot speed. The PS-1000 retrieves all the data sent it, with delicacy, or power (as the music demands), without smearing or masking, without the usual bugaboos of under or over damping, without deviation from their frequency response curve with volume, and without phase-errors that have would stop here with the shortest review I've ever of the 'phones, a detailed account about why I introduction. I think they are the Willie Mays, or of Grado headphones. (Sorry, but I haven't time headphones in the HeadRoom catalog. This will



To begin with what we can see: The new PS-

1000s resemble the Grado all-wooden-earpiece GS-1000s in many ways: in dimensions, in drivers used, in physical layout; but they differ in mass, weight, and the composition of their cabling. The PSs seem to have the same wooden "driver baffle," cut to the same size and shape to which the GS driver is mounted; but the PSs are encased in machined aluminum jackets to increase mass and rigidity. This noticeably cuts any resonances the PSs might have to near zero, particularly noticeable in reducing low-frequency ringing. Wood has some pluses and some minuses for headphone application. Wood is a very resonant substance used in many, many musical instruments because it has pleasant resonant qualities (maybe too resonant for the PS-1000), and because wood is less difficult to manage in production. Encasing the driver baffle in aluminum also makes the entire set more durable, less liable to crack or break into pieces when it is inevitably dropped. For its \$1695 price the buyer gets a longer-lived product.

The headphones' cables are new and thicker, their composition a Grado proprietary secret. A startling difference is upon us here. The PS's cables have something, maybe nearly everything, to do with their improved overall sound signature. I assume that the drivers used in the PS-1000 are very similar to those in the GS-1000 because they seem to have been fitted into a nearly identical driver baffle, using the same sized and identically shaped (what has come to be called "salad bowl") ear cups. So if the 'phones differ, it may be only due to a small modification, perhaps more "finishing" to the nearly identical driver itself. Yet there is a pretty large difference in sound between them. I'll make a guess here. As the two sets (GS and PS) are in-house I could compare them A/B (in my er, um, lab), and I found the older model is a couple of clicks louder than the newer through my HeadRoom Desktop Millett Hybrid amplifier with its discrete step volume attenuator. Everything considered, I'd guess they have found a way to raise the impedance, though the specs say they are still 32 Ohms, as in all their previous models. Maybe that is true of the electrical impedance. Maybe they have raised the mechanical impedance, as with increased coatings on the surround of the driver. This might explain their tighter bass. But this is just a guess. Their spec sheet claims they deliver 5 Hz, though it doesn't say at how many dBs down. They do claim usable bass at 20 Hz, which is humungous.

I went back to my notes about the model GS-1000. At the time of its release, I found there was an audibly noticeable rising response in both the deep bass and the treble registers of the frequency response, something just shy of a "loudness curve." If I swapped out the salad bowl ear cups for the flat, yellow Sennheiser ear cushions (inventory part # HD-414), by front-loading the GS-1000's drivers I could tame that sonic signature a notch or two. To buy these pads at about \$5/pr go to: [http://www.sennheiserusa.com/serviceandsupport\\_part-finder\\_cushions\\_019545](http://www.sennheiserusa.com/serviceandsupport_part-finder_cushions_019545) . The ear pads can be switched without resorting to glue or solder. They just fit snugly, using their inherent elasticity to snug-up. These yellow pads will allow PS-1000 users to enjoy them while potatoed out on the couch, or in most any other position besides sitting perfectly upright.

I also found that the stock model GS-1000's bass would "bottom-out," or lose control, at a level that I thought didn't have enough zotz to really rock. At the '07 N.Y. HeadFi meet a few years back, I spoke of my observations to some of the guys who were into DIY mods, and some said they had noticed a bit of the same things. The PS-1000s seem to have significantly corrected the sonic signature as found in the model GS-1000, while the yellow ear cushions may just make for greater comfort. Together they inch closer and closer to the ideal.

The PS-1000's sound is "flatter" in frequency response than their ancestor, the model GS-1000. They have neither as much of the "loudness curve," nor *any* of the "bottoming out" bass response at anything approaching a facsimile of a live Rock concert. In addition, the mid-range seems a couple of clicks louder, which shortens the height of the curve. I know that if you measure various wires for

impedance in milliohms, capacitance in picofarads, and inductance in millihenries you will find high enough values to see an LCR network, which can be tuned by using some new insulation, or a cocktail of various polymer insulations. In other words, these new Grado flagship model Headphones, Model PS-1000, have a more felicitous match with their new headphone cables. The result is threefold; they sound flatter, retaining their gorgeous Grado mid-range intact; they can be played more loudly without their prodigious bass becoming wooly, and ultimately distorted; and they capture details in a way that is pristinely clean. I like to think of the PS-1000s as Grado's return to the future 'phones, back to the glorious sound of the Grado RS-1, only much smoother, with deeper usable bass, and with much less emphasis on the presence region. All this results in a headphone set that is typically Grado, but more so

The irony in all this is; I remember when Rock was young, the top-of-the-line Sennheiser head-phones were Senn's super-smooth model HD-580. Soon, the model RS-1 was Grado's top-of-the-line head-phones, considered too brashly detailed—a rocker's delight—by some; while Senn's new HD-600 was considered too politely smooth to be anything but a classical head's—what can I say, but—nirvana! Sennheiser answered the audio critics by releasing their HD-650, which sounded more detailed and somewhat more like the Grado RS-1 to me; while Grado released its smoother GS-1000, which (again, to me) seemed an attempt to sound more like the Sennheiser HD-600. Now Sennheiser has offered the HD-800 which (to me) is more presence-oriented than anything they've manufactured in the past. And Grado has developed their PS-1000, which is (to me) more successfully suave than anything they've ever offered. Cute, huh? It reminds me of the historian, don't ask me which, whose thesis was that over the course of the Peloponnesian War, Sparta saw more value in the Athenian approach to learning; and Athens came to realize it had to have a standing army to repulse would-be invaders. It's just another of history's grim twists. But this is not a history lesson: rather, it is a study in competitive results in audio, and how good tube designs come to resemble good transistor designs. If there is a moral to the story it is: as one progresses towards "great sound," the better manufacturers' designs come to sound more and more alike.

Now, I must confess something to you. I've been listening to the Grado PS-1000 headphones with an outstandingly clean and punchy 'phones amp, the KingRex HQ-1 (See the current issue's table of contents for my, and Bob Levi's, reviews.), and an old Marantz 8260 CD player. Every time I get a better headphone amp online I find out how good this ten (?) year old CD player has been all the while. And more than that, I find out how important good cabling is. The AC cord is a Wireworld "Silver Electra" model, fabricated from Silver-Clad, Ohno Continuous-Cast, six nines Oxygen-Free-Copper, second to the top of their line. And my interconnect cables between my CD player and the KingRex HQ-1 are a pair of Wireworld's "silver eclipse" model with the same metals in the same configuration. Together they are excellent, nearly unbelievable, at retrieval of details, or low-level information down in the mix.

For example, today, listening to the London SACD hybrid recording of Puccini's *La Boheme*, (Gheorghiu, Alagna, Chailly), I heard a detail I had never caught before. During the "love music" in the first act (section 9; 3:15 in), when Gheorghiu goes up to hit some high notes, a piccolo goes up with her, a fifth (or an octave?) higher. I think I had always heard that as a distortion, or a resonant filling in the soprano's molar that I was unable to do anything about. Today, I realized I had never before heard it through quality gear equal to that described above, and as clearly identifiable as a piccolo. That's not to say you have to go out and spend more of your hard earned cash on cables, immediately. Though it would make me feel secure if the critic I trusted reported, nay, swore he could hear that separation even when the soprano is singing with all her might, the orchestra is at full cry, and most of all, when the piccolo is in sync with the soprano—the guy swears he can hear the piccolo clearly doubling with her the first time through (but not during the repeat, soon after). This is not a trivial thing. The first time the soprano goes up it has the shrill piccolo overtones that make

her seem desperate, while without the piccolo she sounds tender, and... well... loving (not to put too fine a point on it).

Which is to say, the Grado model PS-1000 headphones are capable of such reproduction, can deliver such distinctions on demand, if and when you are ready to demand it of them. Short of that, if you want to listen to more relaxed music, or just don't feel you can justify another chunk of change to purchase such an AC cord, or such a pair of interconnects, or 'phones amp, you can grow into your PS-1000s as your discretionary budget allows. If you have enjoyed headphones-listening in the past, and you're flush enough just now (and you're still reading), immediately pass Go and listen to the Grado PS-1000 at your nearest dealer; and then, if the hairs on the back of your neck become erect, Go For It. You won't be sorry. The Grado model PS-1000, with a first-class set of AC cords and interconnect cables, and driven by as able a 'phones amp as the KingRex HQ-1, constitutes (as near as I've heard) a world-class system, that would only cost about as much as a "significant" phono cartridge these days. Compared to a free standing system, a headphone system as excellent in *tutti* as the model PS-1000, is in today's dollars, a bargain.

This is Mad Max Dudious, signing off.

Ciao Bambini.