



Group Test: Hi-fi headphones pt2

By Duncan Madden

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Grado RS1i

We're lucky enough to be the first Brit reviewers to get our hands on the RS1i, Grado's much-anticipated follow up to the RS1, considered by some to be the best headphones in the world.

The first thing you notice is the lack of grandiose packaging compared to the Denon and AT models. A simple cardboard box and a bit of foam is all the Grados need - no fanfare here.

The open-backed RS1is feature handcrafted mahogany earpieces specially cured to optimise the wood's tonal properties and are matched to a new dynamic transducer and cable design. The headphones are laid out in what Grado calls an 'open-air' configuration, and it's this that's the key to their quality.

They're the lightest headphones we tested, with simple foam earcups and an entirely old-world retro design and look. The Grados proved to be remarkably open and transparent - you can literally pick out where individual instruments are in the soundscape and trace the lingering detail of each note.

But what sets the RS1is apart is the warmth and personality they inject into the listening experience. Their openness is matched if not outdone by the Sennheisers, but the tonal colour throughout the range is more engaging and thus more rewarding.

We experienced nary a hint of distortion or colouration to any of the music we piped through Grado's cans and even, in a bout of curiosity, plugged them into an iPod Touch to see how they performed. But rather than highlight the nastiness of MP3 compression, they didn't sound half bad. What does the 'i' stand for? Improved.



Overview

Price: £850
More info: [Grado](#)
Transducer: Open-air dynamic
Frequency Response: 12-30,000Hz
Impedance: 32ohms
Weight: 255g

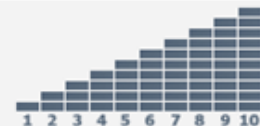
Verdict

Plus points

Plus points Warmth, tonality, openness, musicality, weight, styling

Minus points

No carry case



Sennheiser HD 800

Sennheiser's HD 800 headphones have been making noises in the tech world for a good while now, and after seven years of development have finally launched amidst the company's claim that they're the best in the world.

Rather than live with them as we have the other models in this test however, we experienced them for around an hour at a Sennheiser event with a dedicated high fidelity stereo amp providing the tunes.

Our first impression is that the Sennheisers are huge. Rather than tread the swish natural design route of their rivals, the HD 800s are a celebration of industrial cool. Giant open-back enclosures engulf the ears, with a framework of steel and microfibre and Teflon creating an aerospace-engineered headphone like no other. Confrontational rather than contemporary, we're not sure they'll appeal to everyone.

They feature the biggest neodymium magnets of any dynamic headphone and a new doughnut shaped diaphragm tilted to replicate the way sound enters your ears from floorstanding speakers. The result is a sound that rivals any others on test here. The first and only time we stood with jaw agape at the quality and transparency of the music we were listening to.

The special awareness they afford the listener is mind-boggling - were it not for the giant enclosures you'd barely know you're listening through headphones, so open are they. Clarity, detail, power and depth pour across the entire soundstage without hesitation.

Hyperbole aside, the HD 800 sounded every bit as good as we had hoped. We have to reserve final judgement until we've integrated them into our lives for a while and tested them with a full canon of music, but from first impressions they're as good as headphones get.



Overview

Price: £1,000

More info: Sennheiser

Transducer: Open-air dynamic

Frequency Response: 6-51,000Hz

Impedance: 300ohms

Weight: 260g (without cable)

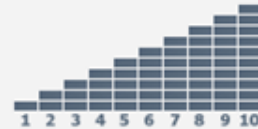
Verdict

Plus points

Openness, power, transparency, detail, technological advancement

Minus points

Confrontational design



Final verdict

Four sets of headphones that would be more than adequate for any audiophile, all are close to the top of the music-playing tree and will blow the socks off most other headphones out there.

The closed-back Denons and Audio-Technicas were both superbly detailed throughout and oozed quality and sophistication both in their presentation and performance. But the closed-back nature of their design shuts them off to some of the warmth and transparency delivered by the open-back Grados and Sennheisers.

In truth the difference between Grado's RS1i and Sennheiser's HD 800 is a case of split hairs or differing aesthetic tastes. There really is so little - if anything at all - wrong with either that they both duly deserve any number of superlatives hurled at them: amazing, faultless, masterpiece... the list could go on.

But there must be a winner and so based on the time we spent with them and our almost compulsive desire to use them over any other headphone (even to listen to the iPod), the Grado RS1i stand up as test winners.

Group test winner: Grado RS1i

