

Mid-Range Headphone Roundup

Author Stuart Andrews

Overall  9/10

After the luxury of the Audio-Technica 'phones, there's something almost reassuringly basic and old-school about the Grado SR60is. There's no fancy-pants 3D Wing support - just a leather covered metal band that keeps the cans clamped to your head - and no complex adjustments to make, bar pulling the units down so the drivers sit centrally on your ear and letting them rotate so that the earpads rest comfortably.

It's classic stuff, but it works. The headband is tight enough to keep the headphones on but not so tight that the foam earpads press hard against your ears, and the thick cable and reinforced, gold-plated connector are good indicators that corners haven't been cut on the physical build quality. Frankly, there's not really an awful lot to go wrong, even if the foam earpads will probably need to be replaced with time.



Still, it's not the physical design that has kept the SR60is in the top tier of sub \$100 headphones for over 15 years, but the extraordinary sound. Looking at the notes I took while running my various test tracks, I'm stuck by how many times I use phrases like 'superb', 'fantastic' or 'incredibly detailed'. After a little burn-in time the sound is less spacious and more up in your face than the sound from the Audio Technica cans, but to compensate it's characterised by a hugely lovable rich, warm tone that extends across the dynamic range.

Where the AD500s feel a little timid on really bass-heavy electronica or hard-edged rock, the Grados seems right at home, pelting out meaty riffs and throbbing bass lines like that's what it was designed

for. What's more, this doesn't come at any expense in terms of clarity. In Ladyhawke's Dusk 'til Dawn I heard layers of instrumental detail I'd never heard before, and while I could subsequently pick them up on the other 'phones, they never rang through so clearly. It's safe to say that if you like bass, then the Grados can deliver. It's probably possible for the subterranean bass in Massive Attack's Teardrop to sound deeper and richer, but not from a pair of headphones costing less than \$80.



I expected the SR60is to fall down slightly when it came to quieter or more complex music, but in fact they still performed exceptionally well. The tone in Miles Davis's Blue in Green was to die for, the cans balancing the mix of piano, horn and stand-up bass very skilfully, and doing justice to the warm, rich sound of John Coltrane's saxophone.

Even in the funeral music from Wagner's Gotterdammarung the Grados worked their magic, coping very impressively with the piece's dramatic shifts and tones of volume, capturing every graduation of the brass as it climbs to a crescendo. Whether rock, pop, dance, classical or even country, it's hard to find a track that the SR60is can't cope with.

In fact, the only reason why you might look elsewhere at this price point is that the very direct, upfront sound of the SR60is can be a bit claustrophobic after an hour or so, which is something I could never say about the Audio Technica ATH-AD500s. To balance this, the SR60is are smaller and lighter, making them more adaptable for portable use, and also a little louder at the same volume level on your player.

Admittedly, they leak as much if not more sound than the Audio-Technicas, and the supra-aural design means that they also let more external noise in, but provided you were considerate with your volume levels - or extraordinarily thick skinned - you could use the SR60is as your only pair of headphones, in or out. And once you get used to these babies, you probably won't want to put them down.

Verdict

Stunning audio quality at stunning value prices. The design might be basic, but the output is surprisingly luxurious.