

Headphone amplifiers help you get the best out of your cans

If you're serious about music through headphones, a dedicated amp could be a wise investment, argues Patrick Fraser

Few amplifiers with any pretensions to audiophile status seem to come with a headphone socket these days, yet the advantages of listening to music through cans are many. First, enjoy the fact that for once your whole listening experience will be free from the effects of room resonances, so it's goodbye to the harsh treble or boomy bass that can afflict traditional loudspeakers. Second, you can listen to your favourite recordings late at night and as loud as you like without that ever-present fear of annoying the neighbours. True, you'll never enjoy the sheer ground-shaking slam of an orchestral *tutti* as played through a well-selected and carefully set-up hi-fi system, but, on the other hand, few experiences beat that feeling of being wired directly into the music.

And besides, even if your source component or amp does come with a headphone output, think about what conventional headphones are: they're miniature loudspeakers with impedances varying from 30 to 600 Ohms and driving them effectively places huge demands on your average on-board headphone amplifier circuit.

That's where the dedicated stand-alone headphone amp comes into play. Built to do a specific job, it will ensure you hear your headphones at their very best, and here we test five to suit all pockets.

Creek OBH-11

At £130, this compact unit from Creek is comfortably the most affordable headphone amplifier here. Like the Musical Fidelity X-Can V2 it's powered by a plug-top transformer and features two pairs of stereo phono sockets at the rear, the second pair marked 'output', allowing the incoming signal to be sent on to a second component down line. This is particularly useful if your amp has just the one tape loop because the Creek can be wired in between your amp and cassette deck and left in your system permanently.

As we did with all the amps in this test, we tried the Creek with a variety of headphones of varying vintage, including some Vivanco

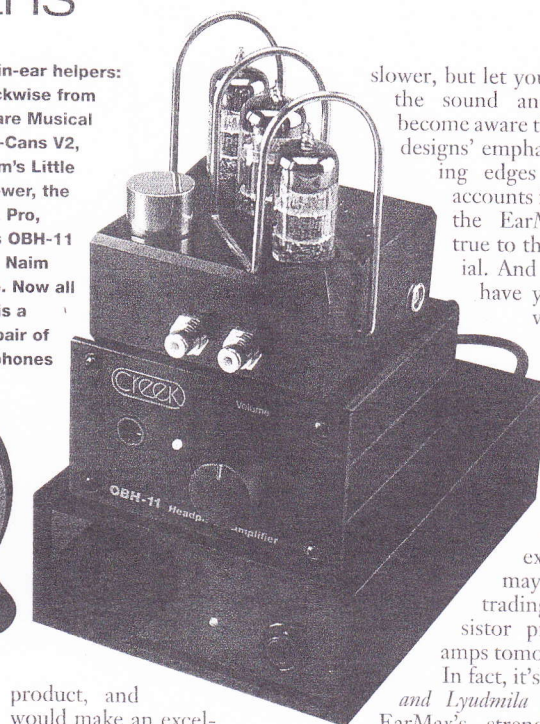


A choice of in-ear helpers: stacked clockwise from bottom left are Musical Fidelity's X-Cans V2, HeadRoom's Little More Power, the EarMax Pro, Creek's OBH-11 and the Naim Headline. Now all you need is a decent pair of headphones

SR850s at £70, a pair of Sony's rather fine, if bulky, MDR CD3000s (£300), right through to Grado's flagship RS-1s at £700. And what a consistently engaging performer the Creek proved to be. Load up Sheffield Lab's recording of Glinka's sonically demanding *Ruslan and Lyudmila Overture* from 'The Moscow Sessions' CD, with the Moscow Philharmonic conducted by Lawrence Leighton Smith, and the performance is delivered with real drive and attack. There's plenty of weight down low to ensure the cellos propel things along, while the brass and strings retain sufficient bite to ensure none of the energy of the recording is lost. Separation is also impressive at this price; there is no hint of compression when either the orchestra piles in or you turn up the volume.

Switch to opera – we sampled Mozart's *The Magic Flute* in a 1964 DG recording conducted by Karl Böhm – and the presentation remains lucid and convincing, while Mitsuko Uchida's rendition of Schubert's Piano Sonata No 16 in D minor, D845, on Philips (2/00), allows the piano good weight and definition, the Creek amp also ensuring that none of the pace of the piece is lost between source and ear.

True, the Creek can't compete with the best in the pack for sheer presence and scale, but at no time does its presentation sound veiled or give the user the impression that anything on the disc is being overlooked. In short, this is a very fine-sounding and flexible



product, and would make an excellent introduction to the world of private listening.

EarMax Pro

One of two valve designs in this group, the EarMax Pro will be coveted by many for its looks alone; it features tiny tubes that glow in the dark, making this the perfect product for those looking for late-night listening thrills with a twist. Unlike the Creek, the EarMax comes with a separate power supply, which hooks up to the amp itself via a Lemo connector. This allows the amp to be positioned well away from the power block (up to 2m, in fact) so minimising the chance of electrical interference between the two units.

The amp itself is sturdily built, well finished and comes with a choice of blue or black paint. If we've any niggle it's that the absence of output sockets on the unit means the EarMax will hog the tape out sockets of your amp, making it impossible to connect, say, a cassette deck to your amp's tape loop, or plumb in the EarMax between your source and amp.

But this is a small price to pay for what is, after all, a hugely impressive performer. Sounding big, weighty and tremendously smooth, the EarMax cruises through the busiest of orchestral climaxes, always sounding fully in control while being capable of huge low-down slam. True, compared with the Naim and Little More, the overall presentation may seem a little laidback at first, music sounding subjectively

slower, but let yourself settle into the sound and you quickly become aware that it's the other designs' emphasis on the leading edges of notes that accounts for this, and that the EarMax is equally true to the source material. And to those who'll have you believe that valves mean bags of bloom but a treble that's rolled off up top, then a quick listen to the Glinka *Overture* with its succession of clean, extended highs, may well have you trading in your transistor pre- and power amps tomorrow.

In fact, it's with the *Ruslan and Lyudmila* piece that the EarMax's strengths are most clearly defined. Strings retain all their attack, yet have greater fullness, the timpani pounds out yet gains texture and body, the bass has greater rasp, and cellos improve the extension down low. And, best of all, this is all set against a background rich in the sort of fine detail that simply eludes the other amps in this group.

But the EarMax impresses most with its presence. Whether it's the Mozart opera or the Schubert sonata, no amp here gives you that feeling of 'being there' quite as well as this tubed tot. Add to that its effortless, its ability to convey all the emotion behind a piece, and its striking looks, and you have a headphone amp to treasure.

HeadRoom Little More Power

From across the Pond comes the Little More Power, another two-piece affair, this time consisting of the headphone amp itself, measuring just 8 x 8 x 7cm, connected to a larger, but cosmetically matching, power supply via a blue captured lead measuring 1.5m. Cute and well finished, and missing only the output sockets, the Little More is unique here in that it offers what the company calls its Audio Image Processor: a bypassable circuit which aims to overcome the 'in-head' experience of headphone listening by providing the listener with spatial clues to the location of instruments and performers in the soundstage. This works by delaying the incoming signal for a very short time (300 milliseconds) to be

precise) before sending it over to the opposite channel. This cross-faded signal is then mixed with the direct signal in an effort to mimic via headphones the manner in which sound is perceived by the ears in everyday life. As this process can result in the cancellation of some high frequencies, a high-pass filter is also included – and again selected via a switch on the fascia – in a bid to restore some sparkle to the sound.

The effect is subtle and certainly works. Whether with the Glinka Overture or *The Magic Flute*, both instruments and vocalists enjoy greater spaciousness and separation with the processing selected, while performances as a whole benefit from good ambience and acoustic detail. Indeed, the Headroom proves an involving listen with the processing switched in or out – we preferred to listen with the Audio Imaging on owing to the greater airiness of the presentation – sounding crisp, clean and tidy up top, while offering a fine sense of pace. This really paid dividends with the Glinka piece, the amp capturing all the vigour of the performance, the furious strings and pumping cellos promoting a sustained bout of imaginary baton waving as the orchestra pounded its way home. Similarly, with the Schubert, the Headroom highlighted the leading edges of the notes to bring an appropriate sense of urgency to the bleak introduction.

However, the Headroom's real strength is with vocal material: when it comes to delivering the nuances of the human voice its abilities can be spellbinding – in this test bringing Act 2 of *The Magic Flute* most convincingly to life. The Little More is also the amp here that best captures the theatre behind the performance.

Having said all that, it never quite lets you forget that you're listening through an electrical circuit. High percussion, while never harsh, sounds artificial at times and, while individual instruments are always easy to follow and even the biggest orchestral climaxes never sound compressed, instruments lack that last ounce of naturalness that the very best amps here can offer. It's only a niggle, but at \$US450 plus postage, the Little More isn't exactly cheap, and that's enough to put it off the pace at the price.

Musical Fidelity X-Cans V2

'I don't care what it does, I want one' is the usual reaction of those first clapping eyes on the tubular, extruded-metal accessories and components that make up Musical Fidelity's X-Series range. Over the past four years the line-up has grown to include a preamp, phono stages, tone control module and a

Creek OBH-11

Price £120

Made by Creek Audio Limited,
2 Bellevue Road, Friern Barnet,
London N11 3ER

Tel 01702 469055

Fax 01702 601883

web www.creekaudio.co.uk

HeadRoom Little More Power

Price \$450 plus postage

Order online from the US:
www.headroom.headphone.com

Made by HeadRoom

Tel 001 800 828 8184

Fax 001 406 587 9484

couple of DACs, not to mention the X-Cans headphone amp. However, this affordable, highly musical, if chummy-sounding little unit has recently been replaced by the X-Can V2 reviewed here.

Like the EarMax Pro, the MF is a valve design, with the sweet-sounding EC88s powering your cans retained from the original design, but wired into an all-new circuit based on that found in the £1200 Nu-Vista preamp.

Those familiar with the original will immediately notice the greater separation and precision on offer here, the V2 sounding far crisper and cleaner than the £130 X-Cans, and better able to bring out the intricacies of the mix thanks to a dose of extra detail.

Whereas the presentation of the original design put it on a par with the Creek in terms of value for money, the V2 is closer to the Naim and EarMax amps, having some nice taut bass and a treble that glistens with sparkle and air.

Play the Glinka and you're treated to a presentation that treads a fine line between spaciousness and weight. Cellos have real substance yet are never lacking in slam, the brass has superb bite yet never sounds abrasive, and the strings are conveyed with both fury and finesse. Overall, there's a correctness to the presentation that's hard to criticise and which never robs the powerhouse orchestral play of its excitement.

Similarly, load up the Schubert Sonata and the V2 delivers all the dynamics of the *staccato* opening along with plenty of tonal colour. There are also some good acoustic clues as to the size of the recording venue. As for the Mozart, voices are conveyed with fine presence and clear articulation and are perceived to be standing well forward of the orchestra – despite being heard over headphones. Better still, the V2 manages to capture

EarMax Pro

Price £425

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The amplifiers tested deserve good headphones – one pair used was a cherished set of Sony MDR-CD3000s



fully the spirit of the piece and at times is capable of rare magic in that it conveys a sense that the performance is happening 'right now'. For the money, the Musical Fidelity amp is a star.

Naim Headline

The Naim nearly didn't make it into this test. Supplied with a captive audio input lead terminated with a DIN plug of the company's own design, it appears that the Headline is designed to be used exclusively with Naim's own amps, which would eliminate it for many readers. But the company's Salisbury headquarters say this isn't the case, non-Naim users can either buy an adapter or a dedicated DIN-to-phono lead made up by a company such as Chord.

Talking of cost, the Headline is priced at £205, though it must be used with a separate power supply. We employed the £170 NA-PSC, which is the usual unit supplied, though Naim points out that the performance will be further enhanced by using the £340 Flat-Cap power supply, or even the £700 Hi-Cap.

Back to the music and, despite a user manual that talks of a five-day run-in period before this amp comes on song, the Naim grabs you fresh from the box. Taut, open and breezy-sounding, this is one of

Musical Fidelity X-Cans V2

Price £150

Made by Musical Fidelity Ltd,
15/16 Olympic Trading Estate,
Fulton Road, Wembley HA9 0TF

Tel 0208 900 2866

Fax 0208 9002983

web www.musical-fidelity.co.uk

Naim Headline

Cost £400

(£215 + £185 power supply)

Made by Naim Audio
Southampton Road, Salisbury,
Wilts SP1 2LN

Tel 01722 332266

Fax 01722 412034

web www.naim-audio.com

those products that has the knack of making itself invisible, leaving the music alone to tell its tale. Play the Glinka and individual instruments are simple to follow and there's never a hint of compression as the piece hots up. Similarly, there's plenty of air around vocalists during *The Magic Flute*, and while the Naim hasn't the sheer presence, openness and low-end extension of the EarMax, it rewards you with a wonderfully tight, rhythmic bass and crisp treble, not to mention a way of layering instruments that makes for tremendously satisfying listening, and it's fatigue-free into the bargain. All in all, we liked the Naim a lot, and the ability to upgrade its performance with higher quality power supplies when funds permit.

Conclusion

There isn't a bad amp here, even the HeadRoom making a highly enjoyable companion, while those on a tight budget, or simply looking to add a headphone output to their system, can buy the Creek with confidence.

Moving up the price scale, the Naim proves a precise and highly enjoyable performer, having superb bass and a rare ability to put the performance first. It's an amp we returned to time and again, and if it's partnered with quality headphones it won't disappoint.

The EarMax Pro sounds big without the bluster, satisfyingly smooth but never lacking in bite, and with grip and presence to die for, this amp is the best-sounding unit in the group. Add in striking looks and you've a good buy.

But for sheer value for money, the Musical Fidelity really stands out. It is tight, airy and offers greater insight into the music than the Creek, yet it costs only £20 more. It's a fine buy. ©