

Audeze Headphones Review:

iSine 20 In-Earphones, LCD-X
Headphones, LCD-3
Headphones, Deckard
Headphone Amp/DAC

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For jaded music listeners, the Audeze line of headphones may be the cure for reconnecting with music and audio. Audeze is not a new name to audiophiles. The company has been making high-quality products for many years but have more recently caught the attention of some folks in the pro audio community, and with good reason.

I ran into the folks from Audeze randomly at the NAMM Show this year over a sandwich. "Mind if we share your table?" I was unfamiliar with the company's products at the time, but we exchanged business cards. Soon after I returned home from NAMM, the first box from Audeze arrived, and what was inside quickly grabbed my attention — LCD-X headphones and a Deckard headphone amp/DAC.

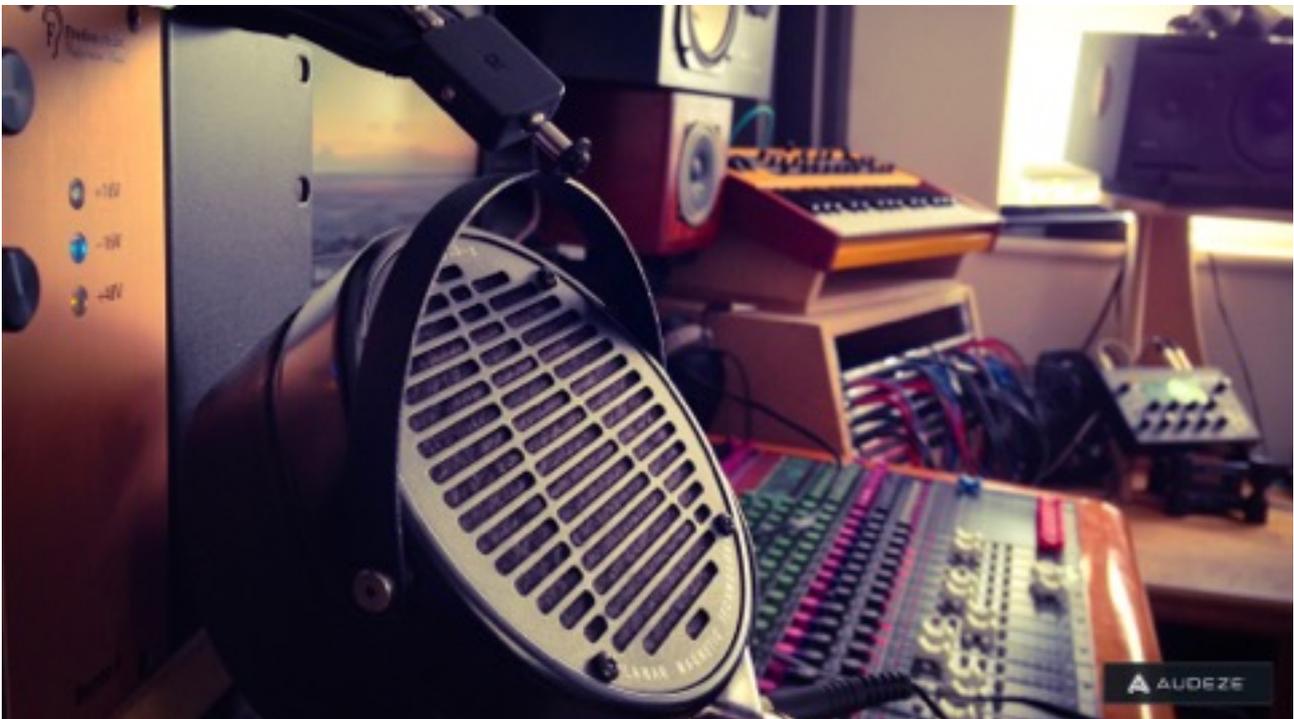


The Audeze LCD-X headphones come in a rugged plastic equipment case, with a nice complement of cables and adapters. The model's open-back earcups house planar magnetic drivers with ultra-thin diaphragms (thinner than a human hair). Claimed frequency response is "5 Hz – 20 kHz, extended out to 50 kHz." The ear pads are premium, butter-soft leather; and they even make what they humorously and unofficially call the "vegan" version, which utilizes microfiber suede instead of leather.

The handcraftsmanship, materials, and design are beautiful and scream quality. At first glance, the LCD-X headphones look overly large and potentially heavy, but when you put them on, they are incredibly comfortable and almost disappear on your head.

The Audeze Deckard headphone amp/DAC also stands out in its beauty and purpose. It connects to your macOS or Windows computer via USB, or to an analog source via standard RCA connectors. Controls are simple: input (USB, RCA), gain (high, medium, low), and a volume pot. RCA outputs let you send the analog audio signal to another device. Again, the design and build are stellar.

When listening to the LCD-X, I forget that I have them on. I would describe them as sounding very flat across the frequency spectrum, with an incredibly vivid presentation of space. They have lovely detail without any hype. When I mix, I typically only use headphones to listen for small clicks, missed crossfades, panning details, and such. I find it an exercise in futility to try to EQ and set mix levels with headphones on, especially for those elements in the center of the soundstage. And with



closed-back headphones? Forget it. Audeze told me that several mix engineers have adopted the LCD-X, and after my own trial runs at using them for mixing, I can see why. They are not overly flattering or hyped, and they translate accurately back and forth between my studio monitors and the "real world."

A second shipment from the company followed. This box contained LCD-3 headphones and iSine 20 in-ears.

The LCD-3 model shares its open-back form factor with the LCD-X, with the addition of some wood trim. It too comes in a plastic equipment box with cable and adapter accessories. Voicing is slightly different, with a little more warmth in the lower midrange. As with the LCD-X, listening to the LCD-3 is an immersive experience — yet not isolating, due to both models being open-back designs. This also lets me listen for long periods of time without fatigue, because my eardrums are not being pushed around by a hyped bass response from closed-back cans.

Because of the bump in the LCD-3's low-mids that I find appealing for listening, I would likely use the LCD-X for studio reference duties, and the LCD-3 for listening at home — although having two pairs of these expensive cans may be an unrealistic and gluttonous dream for many. In actuality, I think either would serve you well in both scenarios.

But don't get me wrong. The LCD-X is far from the Yamaha NS-10M of headphones. On the contrary! I can see either LCD model being extremely beneficial to anyone needing to work on mixes in an apartment, with easily aggravated roommates or neighbours, or in other circumstances when cranking it up is not an option but you need a solid and accurate representation of your audio.

The iSine 20 is one of the in-ear models from Audeze. Technically, its earbuds are not completely "in-ear" due to the planar magnetic drivers that are positioned outside of the ears, but they do have a low-profile. Removable "hangers" keep them from falling off of your ear, and I found them to be comfortable, even for long listens. A variety of swappable rubber eartips are included,



accommodating a variety of ear shapes and sizes. I have had some decent earbuds over the years, and these Audeze ones just blow them all away. The resolution, frequency response, and soundstage are fantastic. I took the iSine 20 earbuds on a recent trip, and although they are not noise isolating with their semi-open backs, they were fine, even with typical airplane noise. I even ran off some rough mixes on them while on the road, and the results were pretty decent! Would I mix a record with them? No, but that's not their intended or touted use.

The iSine 20 package includes a Lightning cable that has an integrated DAC, DSP, and amp. A standard analog cable with a 3.5 mm jack is provided as well. Worth noting is that all Audeze headphones and in-ears have detachable cables — brilliant, in my opinion. How many pairs of headphones are in the graveyard because the cable got jacked up? I have a pile of them that could be repaired with some soldering and time; I do have a soldering iron, but am often short on the time. I wish more headphones incorporated easily replaceable cabling.

All of the Audeze headphones I was sent sound fine (great, actually) with my iPhone and laptop, but they all shine significantly with the Deckard DAC and headphone amp. At my studio, the Crane Song Avocet 2 [Tape Op #103] is the best listening experience of all, not only with mixes at 24/96, but also with streaming audio, wireless from iPhone or laptop.

Look, I am spoiled. I listen to music all day through the Avocet, and there is a price tag associated with it and any other quality DAC. But the difference between the Avocet and the converter in my MacBook Pro is a great and cavernous divide. The Deckard falls into a nice price point in between no DAC and a high-end converter, and is far from a compromised product. A/B'ing music from the laptop with and without the Deckard was dramatic. The soundstage was wider; the bass tighter and more defined; and the high-frequency response was smooth and sophisticated. The Deckard alone will improve the headphones you already have, and when paired with the LCD-X and LCD-3, the experience is fantastic.

At this point, you might be wondering if high-priced headphone systems like these are worth it, especially when so many people rely on cheap earbuds, overhyped "lifestyle" headphones, or just the built-in speakers on their mobile devices. Or maybe the bigger question you're asking is if good listening routines or habits even matter in this day and age.

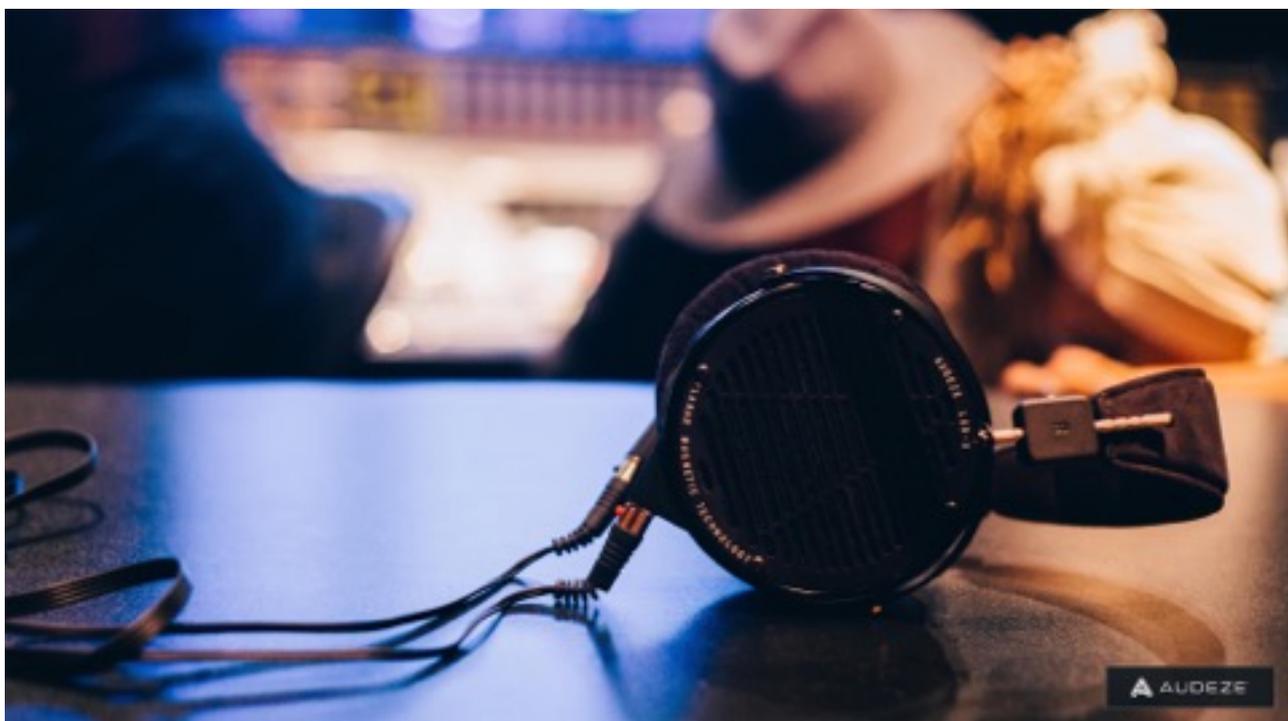


Last week, my son was running around the house playing music from a streaming service via the speaker on the iPhone — which is not an uncommon event. This is in a room with a nice Rega Planar 3 turntable, Rega amp, and some PMC speakers. The rest of the house is wired to stream wirelessly from whatever device to different zones. The multiroom streaming system is convenient, but far from a hi-fi listening solution.

When I got the Audeze LCD headphones for review, I set my kids up with the Deckard DAC and the new headphones. I wanted them to really experience something close to what I get to every time I mix a record — detail, emotional connection, and impact. Their reaction was delightful for all involved. I watched their faces light up as they listened to a variety of their favourite tunes, hearing new things and really connecting to the music in a way that they had not experienced before. "I never heard that before." "Those background vocals were moving around my head." And so on.

As music makers and creators, we spend so much time, energy, and attention on the minutest of details in our quest to bring music to life; and these days, a lot (if not most) of it is lost on compression codecs and poor playback systems. It's ironic that with how technologically advanced we are, mass music-consumption has been dumbed down so badly in the name of convenience.

I am 100% on-board with the idea that a great song is a great song, no matter what. Recorded at the best studio in the world, or on a \$100 USB mic connected to a laptop, or even on a micro cassette — it shouldn't matter. But listen to that song in a setting that lets you engage and connect, and it will be a more visceral experience. I want to pass down this notion that there is more to the listening experience than what you get out of laptop speakers or even those next-step-up desktop computer speakers.



Is it an extra step to plug a headphone amp/DAC into the laptop and be in a fixed location to listen on great headphones? Sure it is. In the same way I still enjoy sitting down and actually listening to something on vinyl, it is a process and ritual that I see value in passing down to my kin.

The only issue I have with Audeze products is that they have made listening on pretty much any other headphone system a letdown. Like everything else in pro audio, high quality comes at a price; and in this case, it is worth it. With the build and sonic quality, the removable cables, and protective travel case, these could be the last headphones you need to buy.

<https://federalaudio.com.au/collections/audeze>