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AUDEZE LCD-X HEADPHONES

“State of the Art”

Equipment report

by Arnie Nudell | Sep 23rd, 2014

Nils Lofgren is a fantastic guitarist. And the guitar playing and his singing from the album Nils Lofgren—Acoustic Live is an extraordinary example of really good rock music that is excellently recorded. Some of his guitar work can only be characterized as breathtaking, and the sound produced by the LCD-X is probably better than you would experience from the live concert. This recording was done at a concert and the vigorous clapping and variety of noises from the audience are reproduced in a way that makes you feel you are really amongst them, while the guitarist sounds almost right in front of you. The dramatic and explosive strums of the steel strings on the acoustic guitar are reproduced with stunning fidelity, and Lofgren’s voice has a sandy, throaty quality perfect for the song he was singing.

Summary and Conclusion

The reason I chose not only to use the Resonance DAC but also ultimately to purchase it was its extraordinary resolution accompanied by its accurate saturation of tone color density with everything I played. This can be an unusual combination, in that many DACs with high resolution are very edgy-sounding or lacking in tone color. In comparison to other DACs that I listened to, this one seem to bring a measure of life to all of the music played and therefore was a great adjunct to the LCD-X.

Another very interesting DAC was the new PS Audio DirectStream. I must come clean and tell you that I was asked by Paul McGowan to listen to and comment on this new DAC with the LCD-X headphone. All I can tell you now is that soon I will buy one and I would advise you to do the same.

There are over 100 headphones on the market today, and I’m not going to tell you I have listened to all of them, but I have listened to a fair number of top contenders under ideal conditions. Since I am writing this review for The Absolute Sound, I am using only its criteria, which is adherence to the sound of unamplified music, to judge the winners. I guess it could be called the battle of the flagships. Among the legions of headphones currently on the market I could only find four that I would characterize as flagships. They are: the Sennheiser HD 800, the Stax 009, the Audeze LCD-3, and the Audeze LCD-X. Each of these headphones has some flaws, but none of them has what I would consider fatal flaws, like huge variations in frequency response, or high distortion, or limited bandwidth, or odd colorations—anything that obviously distorts the music. Having listened extensively to these four flagships, the headphone that presented music in the most astonishingly accurate way is the Audeze LCD-X.

The LCD-X has the fewest and the smallest flaws of the four contenders. I’m a very meticulous guy when it comes to finding faults in any piece of audio equipment. In my experience, there are precious few transducers that are so close to flawless that pointing out their shortcomings is merely

nitpicking. It was difficult to discover the flaws of the LCD-X even after listening to them for five months with the superb equipment and the superb program material I have described above. All the people of Audeze and especially its technical staff deserve enormous credit for greatly advancing the state of the art in headphones. I only have two small criticisms/suggestions. It would be nice if Audeze could introduce a gentle boost between 1.5kHz to about 3.5kHz of about 1dB. This is really not much of a change, but it would endow the headphones with a little more openness in this sonic range. The second suggestion would be to decrease the mass per unit area of the diaphragm so that it would then have even higher resolution. This could be done fairly easily by increasing the impedance of the LCD-X a small amount, to perhaps 35 or 40 ohms from the current 20 ohms. Though I can nitpick from the outside, there is no doubt that the engineers at Audeze are real artists and experts in regard to what they have created.

The Sennheiser HD 800 is an excellent headphone having perhaps the best overall imaging of any headphone on the market. Its two flaws are, however, somewhat larger than those of the LCD-Xs. The HD 800s have a rather nasty peak from about 5kHz to 6kHz, which makes amplifier selection very critical. My other criticism is of much smaller significance. The HD 800 has what I would characterize as overdamped bass, which deprives this otherwise excellent headphone of some of the qualities of music that give it life. This is the only dynamic headphone of the four flagships, and is a brilliant design using this technology.

The Stax 009 is the only electrostatic headphone in this group, which is similar to the planar-magnetic in many ways, using electric force as opposed to magnetic force. This headphone has so many great characteristics that its flaws are really hard to describe. The best way I can summarize them is to say that the Stax sounds very analytical, and therefore seems not to convey the emotion of music as well as the other contenders. It also has less dynamics in its bass region, which diminishes some of the excitement in music. Having said this, I still consider the Stax 009 to be a magnificent headphone.

The LCD-3 is a remarkable example of the planar-magnetic design. My only small criticism is that it has a darker than neutral quality that can diminish the open quality of live music. Otherwise, as I said earlier, this has been the Audeze flagship for several years, and for good reason. As I was writing the conclusion of this review, I learned that Audeze was now putting some of the technology of the LCD-X headphone in its updated LCD-3 and LCD-2. By the time you read this review these new products will have been on the market for at least three months.

We now have come full circle in my quest to understand, and participate in, personal audio. I now truly understand what it is about and why it is appreciated by so many people. It is my opinion that the LCD-X can compete with all of the very best high-end loudspeakers. This headphone, for example, has extraordinarily wide and even frequency response which extends from below 20Hz to far beyond 20kHz, and even at very loud levels, has very low distortion. It also has the great quality called continuousness, a term which I believe was coined by The Absolute Sound's Jonathan Valin. [Actually, the term was coined by HP; I just expanded on his idea.—JV.] It means that the sound seems to be cut from a single cloth in that, from the lowest to the highest frequency, there is no difference in sonic quality. It is one of the great characteristics of a single transducer.

Many of the best speakers on the market do not exhibit all of these qualities. I am not in any way trying to denigrate great speaker systems. My point is that to purchase a truly state-of-the-art speaker system and all of its attendant pieces would cost several hundreds of thousands of dollars. For a state-of-the-art personal audio system the price would be less than \$30,000. And I can assure you I have enjoyed my state-of-the-art personal audio system as much as any speaker that I have had in my listening room over the years.

I now understand that both headphones and speakers can offer a wonderful connection to what really is the bottom line, and that is the enjoyment of music.

SPECS

Type: Planar-magnetic stereo headphones
Style: Open circumaural
Diaphragm area: 6.17 square inches
Optimal power: 1–4W
Maximum power: 15W (200ms)
Impedance: 22 ohms, purely resistive
Sensitivity: 95dB for 1mW
Weight: 600 grams