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There used to be a time when amateur musicians would look in envy at professional bands on big stages at the end of the set, when their in-ear monitors would be pulled out and hung around their neck like a medal — one awarded to only the chosen few who could afford to hear themselves in a live environment. At the lower end of the gigging food chain, we were surrounded by a mishmash of old speaker cabinets and feedback!

These days, in-ear monitors, or IEMs, are no longer the exclusive preserve of the professional musician. They have become far more affordable and, with the advent of cheaper digital mixers and wireless systems, are now far more realistic proposition for semi-pro and amateur musicians. IEMs can improve your performance (you can hear what you play and sing and don't have to fight against a loud band) and save your hearing. If, like me, you are a drummer playing to click or backing tracks, it's almost impossible to work without them.

Founded in 2014, Xvive are relative newcomers to the pro-audio arena and not a name I was familiar with, but they appear to be making inroads with their wireless technology, which includes the U4 In Ear Monitor Wireless System. To complement this system, they've launched their own in-ear monitors, the T9s. Designed and hand-finished in the USA, and featuring dual balanced-armature drivers (read on for more on this design approach), the T9s profess to offer "pro-level audio quality previously only available from custom in-ears, at a much more accessible price". Having used custom-mould IEMs for many

Xvive T9

PROS

- Great build quality.
- Balanced sound.
- Impressive isolation.
- Detachable cable.

CONS

- May be a little large for some people.

SUMMARY

If you'd like to try in-ear monitoring but aren't ready to splash out on custom moulds, the T9s are a great option, offering exceptional build quality, great sound and impressive isolation at an affordable price.



In-ear Monitors

Can off-the-peg IEMs really compete with custom moulds?

years, I was keen to find out if the T9s were a worthy alternative.

Box Your Ears

Arriving in a neat white box, the T9 package comprises a hard-shell zip case, cleaning tool and 3.5mm-to-6.5mm headphone adaptor. The earpieces themselves come mounted in a large foam block for protection, beneath which is stored a 1.5m rubberised cable that attaches to each earpiece via a two-pin connector. A three-inch plastic sleeve surrounds the cable at the point where it attaches to the earpiece, making it curve slightly and enabling it to fit neatly around the top of your ear. Having a detachable cable is always a bonus — no need to get new headphones if the cable fails or is damaged. A selection of both silicone and memory foam earbuds are provided, in three different sizes, with the silicone buds coming in both red and yellow, so you could use a different colour on each side to more easily identify right and left.

Constructed from a clear resin, the earpieces feel very high quality. There are no obvious seams where they might come apart or break, and the cable

connects with a reassuring click and feels very securely attached. The transparent design not only looks great but also allows you to see the internal workings, which include two balanced-armature Knowles drivers — one powerful, high-headroom bass/mid balanced armature, and one custom-tuned and custom-ported micro tweeter. Unlike dynamic drivers, which use a coil and magnet to create sound, balanced-armature drivers vibrate a tiny reed balanced between two magnets inside a tiny enclosure. The motion of the reed is transferred to a stiff diaphragm and on to an output port, which can be tuned for a specific frequency range. Its compact design makes it ideal for in ear-monitors, and allows the use of multiple drivers to handle different frequency ranges, achieving an overall flatter response than you might get with dynamic drivers.

Fit & You Know It

When I first took the earpieces from their foam packaging, I was immediately struck by how large they are. Even with them inserted deep into my ear canal, they protrude quite a way. Whilst this didn't cause me an issue, it may prove to be problematic for someone with smaller ears.

After experimenting with the earbuds, I opted for the smaller memory foam buds. It is well worth spending time to ensure you get the best fit possible, not only to ensure a secure and comfortable fit but also because poorly fitting IEMs will compromise

the performance of the system, especially in the lower frequencies.

The next step was to listen to some audio. Be warned, these IEMs are LOUD! If you're switching to the T9s from another set of headphones, I strongly suggest you turn the source volume down and work your way up to a comfortable listening level. Several factors have a bearing on how loud headphones are, but the sensitivity is a good basic guide. The T9 spec quotes 120dB at 1kHz, whereas my ACS custom moulds are rated at 112dB and the Shure SE215s at 107dB. You don't need to drive these IEMs hard to get a good listening level.

Playing back a selection of pre-recorded material from a headphone amp, I thought the T9s performed very well, giving a smooth

which makes for a much less fatiguing experience during a two-hour set.

I found the T9s to be very comfortable and secure, which is also an important factor if you're wearing them for long physical performances.

I Will Xvive

It's almost impossible to explain exactly how a pair of IEMs sound, as using them is an experience that's unique to the wearer. Several factors can affect your perception, with fit being the primary one. Having used the T9s now on several gigs, I'm very much enjoying them. They are a great fit, and very comfortable; the isolation is on a par with my custom moulds, and the dual balanced-armature drivers give an even sound with an extended bass response and a clear and detailed high end. This

“The isolation is on a par with my custom moulds, and the dual balanced-armature drivers give an even sound with an extended bass response and a clear and detailed high end.”

and balanced sound. The bass was full and the high frequencies cut through very nicely. There's no harshness to the sound and, if anything, that gives the T9s quite a hi-fi quality.

The second test was to use the T9's live. I play in a function band where I regularly use in-ear monitors (the ACS Evoke 2 custom moulds I've already mentioned), so it was simply a case of swapping headphones. Having learned from my earlier experience, I reduced the volume of my monitor setup considerably to compensate for the T9s' sensitivity.

The sound isolation provided by the T9s was excellent, certainly on a par with my custom moulds. If you're new to IEMs, the feeling of detachment from the outside world can take a little getting used to, but it does ensure the in-ear mix you create isn't compromised by external noise, particularly on a loud stage. This is especially important when playing drums and playing to a click.

I noticed more low end in my mix than I'm used to, but not to the point where I found it an issue — bass remained clear and defined. As with the pre-recorded material, the highs were very much present but not harsh,

makes extended listening particularly pleasant, and the high sensitivity means there will be plenty of level, regardless of what you are using to drive them.

The detachable cable is a plus point, and I've also found that its rubberised quality prevents it from tangling up. The earpieces themselves look as though they will easily endure the rigours of life on the road — which is, again, an important consideration.

Most IEMs in this price range use either two dynamic drivers or a hybrid combination of a dynamic and balanced armature. The ACS Evolve, with its three Knowles balanced-armature drivers, would cost closer to £650 once you factor in the cost of getting ear impressions for the custom moulds. So I'd highly recommend the Xvive T9s to anyone looking to enter the world of IEMs, as they do, indeed, appear to offer something comparable to custom-mould quality at a far more affordable price. **///**

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