

Review of the ABYSS AB1266 Phi TC on Musicalhead



Here I am again. And to tell you the truth - as an avowed fan of the American headphone manufacturer I have been looking forward to the following review for quite some time. Because today I finally review the brand new ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC for you.

Form follows function. No ear loudspeaker is more suited to this well-known design philosophy than the reference headphones by Joe Skubinski. You love this archaic design - or you hate it. Or - as an avowed Knight of the Grail of Sound one simply follows the pure teaching of the best possible reproduction of one's musical treasures. Just like me.

And according to the manufacturer JPS-Labs, the new ABYSS now called TOTAL CONSCIOUSNESS even has "the highest resolution of all headphones ever produced". Well, that can be cheerful. Paper is known to be very patient. And such pithy formulations must first be followed by great musical deeds.

Although Joe has already kept his word on the new DIANA PHI and left me speechless about the almost ultimate bass reproduction of the seductive lady. And also the PHI drivers taken from the big brother help the small headphones to a clearly improved spatial representation ability and enable the DIANA PHI an astonishingly filigree detail work. As a result, the sound of the DIANA PHI has actually improved on its already excellent predecessor.

And with his new TOTL AB1266 PHI TC ear loudspeaker, Joe promises an unprecedented level of natural transparency in the entire frequency range, without undue harshness in the sound, thanks to the completely newly developed driver diaphragms. And this with a bass that is even faster than the PHI models, in terms of impulses and an excessive depth.

This is hard to believe given the undeniable acoustic qualities of the excellent predecessors. Or has JPS-Labs definitely built the best headphones in the world? This would be conceivable - under certain circumstances - indeed. Because with every new version of his unconventional design, Joe still raised the bar a little bit.

Even the AB1266 PHI (CC) put the current number 1 headphone on musical head, the HIFIMAN SUSVARA, dangerously close to the driver housing. After all, Dr. Fang Bian's masterpiece has been unchallenged at the top of the audiophile food chain in my personal TOP10 hit list for one and a half years now.

No other headphone has yet been able to break the HIFIMAN phalanx and seriously challenge the orthodynamic Beau. In particular, the perfect balance of all musical characteristics obviously ensured the SUSVARA a permanent stay in the sun of the Sound Olympus.

Well, at least until today. In fact, once again, an ABYSS ear loudspeaker has the audacity to challenge the undisputed king of Orthodynamics and, as a result, to push him from his long-standing throne. Whether the AB1266 PHI TC will succeed in this ambitious project, we will now find out here and now.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the German importer Uwe Heile from Hifistudio Falkensee, who is responsible for the prompt shipping of the headphones.

A dear greeting of course also to Joe for the always competent e-mail support to clarify technical questions as well as the provision of an extensive SUPERCONDUCTOR cable set for the AB1266 PHI TC. Thank you very much for that.

Packaging & Equipment

The ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC will also be delivered in the almost anachronistic looking wooden box like all its predecessors. And again I decided for the LITE version of the ABYSS model series.

Whereby the perhaps somewhat unfortunate designation only refers to the corresponding equipment variant and by no means points to a qualitative difference in the headphones themselves.

The enormous price difference to the COMPLETE package of the AB1266 PHI TC results primarily from the replacement of the standard cabling with a higher quality SUPERCONDUCTOR cable set, which, according to Joe, should help the ABYSS ear loudspeaker to formidable tonal heights in connection with adequate playing partners.

Since I am usually rather suspicious of such promises and the required (cable) surcharge is supposedly in no reasonable proportion to the headphones, I decided not to use this option in my pre-selection.

I also don't attach much importance to the rustic stand included in the large set and a rather heavy carrying bag made of cowhide leather. Because who the hell would carry an ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC around with them? Well, I certainly don't.

However, curiosity wins out most of the time. And when Joe kindly offered me to provide a complete SUPERCONDUCTOR cable set directly from New York for my review, I couldn't resist of course. And at all. How bad can that get? After all, it's just a profane cable.

Speaking of cables. Every AB1266 PHI TC comes of course also in the LITE "economy version" with a high quality 2.50 m long connection, which is equipped with a stable 4-pin XLR connector on the connection side. An adapter to 6.3 mm jack is of course included in the scope of equipment.

The LITE equipment is completed by a short manual of the manufacturer as well as a personal "Owners-Card" with the model name and the serial number. So everything as usual.

Workmanship & Wearing Comfort

This applies equally to the still outstanding and loving workmanship of all ABYSS ear loudspeakers.

And the solid construction of the AB1266 PHI TC made of high-strength aircraft aluminium impresses again and again, even after many years. The headphones, available exclusively in dark grey ceramic coating, are built like a veritable fortress. Plastic? No chance.

The ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC does not stand a chance against material-related discolorations. The integrated orthodynamic design with meticulously selected driver pairs is also equipped with an integrated and patented device to avoid internal resonances.

The custom-made neodymium magnetic drive is also equipped with an optimized slot pattern, the front apron made of low carbon steel with additional resonance control.

Both the use of extremely thin diaphragms with further reduced mass and the acoustic filters in the form of foamed aluminium braids on the outside of the driver housing, perfectly matched to the membrane properties, ensure the extremely open and spacious sound of an ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC.

Interestingly, the special design does not require any magnetic structures on the rear, which additionally prevents unwanted sound reflections. A headband made of genuine animal skin as well as magnetically removable ear cushions made of high-quality lambskin that can be finely adjusted in 20° steps and recently perforated testify to the high processing standard of the American HIGH-END forge.

The relatively high weight of the ABYSS is of course rather detrimental to the wearing comfort. One might think. Although the AB1266 PHI TC with 640 g has gained another 20 g compared to its predecessor, an optimal weight distribution on the head of the respective Grail bearer relativizes presumed comfort losses more or less quite clearly.

Especially since the basic width and angulation of the ear loudspeaker can be easily varied via a central adjustment screw in the headband. In addition, the headband can also be slightly bent up if necessary by adding a little heat. Once the AB1266 PHI TC has been carefully adjusted to the individual requirements of its owner, the result is a fascinating listening experience.

Technique

Despite the extensive e-mail traffic with JPS-Labs in the past weeks, I could unfortunately only find out a few special features of the new ABYSS headphone, now called "TOTAL CONSCIOUSNESS". Because Joe is unfortunately not very talkative about questions concerning the technical optimization of his babies. "Sorry I can't expand on how we did this :)" All right, after all, Fang could read along in this blog.

Already in the previous version PHI, the magnetic flux density Φ was significantly increased in order to increase tonal characteristics such as precision and locating sharpness due to improved phase fidelity.

And although Joe says that microphase distortion in his reference headphones is almost no longer measurable, the new AB1266 PHI TC has been able to significantly reduce the phase anomalies on the microsurface of the diaphragms. I see.

And although the diaphragm thickness of the diaphragms was again reduced with the new ear loudspeaker, the stiffness could be increased to the same extent. In addition, according to Joe, the new drivers have optimized self-attenuation properties, which is intended to improve reproduction in the low bass range in particular.

In addition, all the main components of the aluminium chassis have been perfected to compensate for finely resonant losses of the driver diaphragms, especially in the mid and high frequencies. These measures are responsible for increased transparency in these frequency ranges. Says Joe.

Furthermore, the impedance of the AB1266 PHI TC has also been slightly increased - it is now 47 Ohm again. The efficiency, on the other hand, is still quite modest at 88 dB/mW. Power-technically potent play partners are therefore still obligatory for an ABYSS.

Preparation

But let's now come to the probably interesting part of this review. And in order to be a real ABYSS ear loudspeaker and to be successful against a HIFIMAN headphone, you first have to choose the right weapon.

I don't want to be disrespectful at this point - but precious pieces like a HIFIMAN SUSVARA or the ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC prove their complete sonic talent mostly only in a few select playing partners of absolute world class format. Sorry, but on most other devices both ear loudspeakers unfortunately all too often lag behind their outstanding musical possibilities.

And to avoid any misunderstandings, transistor amplifiers like my WOO AUDIO WA11 TOPAZ or especially the new QUESTYLE CMA TWELVE are of course capable of driving an ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC up to very ambitious levels.

However, even these components, which undoubtedly stand out in their segment, sometimes play somewhat bloodlessly and flatly, as well as comparatively less confidently, if you then unfairly compare them with the best headphone amplifiers on this planet. Anyone who has ever "experienced" the ABYSS AB1266 PHI (CC) or the HIFIMAN SUSVARA on a VIVA EGOISTA 845 or the RIVIERA AIC10 now knows exactly what I mean.

But of course I would like to take this opportunity to explore the musical abilities of the two opponents as fully as possible in this comparative test. After all, today it's no less a matter of choosing probably the best headphones in the world.

Consequently, the full arsenal of weapons will of course be used for my review. Power filter (NIAGARA1000) and power cable (NRG Z3) are all provided by AUDIOQUEST, the streamer/server is an AURALIC ARIES G2. The digital data material is converted via a VEGA G2 of the same manufacturer. The obligatory HEIMDALL2 USB digital cable is supplied by NORDOST.

Another NORDOST HEIMDALL2 RCA connection then transmits the analog data to my RIVIERA AIC10, which finally transmits the musical cost to the above mentioned protagonists. Either using the two original cables, or using a CARDAS CLEAR, or the additional SUPERCONDUCTOR stripping.

As "preamplifier" for the RIVIERA AIC10 I choose a MULLARD M8136 (NOS) tube. It has the advantage over the slightly more dynamic PHILIPS MINIWATT (NOS), as the former offers a unique midrange meltdown. I like this tube.

What an enormous effort for a headphone review, some of you might think. And of course you are undoubtedly right. But despite that, I'm still looking forward to a final title fight of the extra class of probably the best ear loudspeakers in the world today. The weapons are sharpened.

In last year's big comparative test on Musicalhead "Battle of the Orthodynamics 2.0" the HIFIMAN HE1000 SE was able to score an important victory in the orthodynamic top class and to narrowly outperform its 3 opponents. An ABYSS was not there at that time. This will change today.

To what extent the SUPERCONDUCTOR cable set will play a co-decisive role in the awarding of the title remains to be seen. After all, the ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC in the COMPLETE version also loosely matches the price of the HIFIMAN SUSVARA on the CARDAS CLEAR. So also a monetary duel at eye level.

Once again, the usual suspects from classical music, jazz, blues, pop and rock serve me as musical test material. The corresponding digital data in HIGH-RES resolution are either streamed directly via QOBUZ or retrieved directly from the SSD hard disk of the ARIES G2.

Further information about the ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC can be found, as always, on the manufacturer's website at: <https://eu.abyss-headphones.com/pages/abyss-ab-1266-phi-reference-headphone> or from the German distributor at: <https://berlin-hifi.de>

Sound Test

Like all orthodynamic headphones, the ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC requires a relatively long break-in time (at least 150 hours) to develop its musical potential. The same also applies to the SUPERCONDUCTOR stripping, which, according to Joe, should also be carefully "burned in".

Of course this is not a problem. Because as an avowed Knight of the Grail of Sound, I naturally didn't make this comparative test easy for myself. For 4 weeks I compared the two protagonists in listening sessions lasting several hours until late into the night. And that with really every imaginable musical material.

One of the reasons for this was that it was always difficult for me to detach myself from this simply phenomenal playback chain. No matter which of the

two headphones was on the move musically. As a result, my wife had to separate me from my listening position with gentle force. For example by withdrawal of love. Or - even worse - with the threat of a cooking strike.

So where should I start? Maybe with the new album of the Korean artist Joun Sun Nah "Immersion". After just a few bars it becomes clear that Joe Skubinski has created a new exceptional headphone with the new AB1266 PHI TC.

The voice of Joun Sun Nah is not only razor-sharp and focused in virtual space, especially the natural degree of plasticity is not less than breathtaking. The accompanying instruments are acoustically very precisely separated from the artist and projected into the spatial context as a matter of course.

However, the HIFIMAN SUSVARA doesn't make this any worse, it also beguiles the senses with its slightly warmer tuning and even more beautiful timbres and involves the listener more in the musical events with its spatially somewhat more intimate way of playing. My wife agrees. Because she loves these headphones.

The ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC responds with an almost unbelievable dynamic. In the title song of Ahmad Jamal's "Blue Moon", the actors seem almost within reach. And again the ABYSS ear loudspeaker impresses with an unbelievably physical and at the same time exactly focused reproduction of the percussion instruments. The individual strokes are dust-dry, extremely fast and provided with an emphatic, but at the same time natural-looking hardness.

Although the SUSVARA is almost equal in this discipline as well, it operates in the midbass range with slightly less pressure and pushes the individual instruments closer together. Nevertheless, the HIFIMAN inspires with a wonderful musical flow and as a result lets me dive deep into the new album of Ahmad Jamal.

The new ABYSS not only plays much more finely dynamic than all its predecessors, but is also more transparent in the midrange. Combined with an exorbitant fast playback of the transients. Moreover, every instrument can be located exactly to the point in the three-dimensional sound space. The edge sharpness is superb. A grandiose performance of the new TC version.

In general, spaciousness is still one of the greatest strengths of all ABYSS reference headphones. The (live) recording "In The Air Tonight" from Phil

Collins's 2016 new album "Face Value" serves as an exemplary example. Because the AB1266 PHI TC moves me after a few moments felt to the place of the action. In the midst of a cheering crowd, this ear loudspeaker convinces me with its incomparably open and authentic live atmosphere. Unbelievable for headphones.

Here the HIFIMAN SUSVARA can't hold 100% against it. Individual details are meticulously and delicately resolved and carefully peeled out of the complex sonic events as with the American opponent - but even now the band and audience are moving closer together again. The HIFIMAN does not achieve the enormous extension of an AB1266 PHI TC in width and depth.

The bass range of the new ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC is perfectly tuned. Would you like an example? In Johann Sebastian Bach's classic "Tocatta und Fuge D-Mol BWF 565" by Anton Bogner (Classic Reference/ Bell-Records), the New York ear loudspeaker inspires with an exorbitant depth into the really deepest cellars, which can almost be felt physically on this organ recording.

The bass scores with a profound contour, disturbing resonances are never noticeable. The ABYSS' midbass range is excellently structured and has no tendency to emphasis. Especially in combination with adequate playing partners like the RIVIERA AIC10, the headphones are able to convince with an incredibly realistic pressure of the large organ pipes. Simply great class.

Of course, the HIFIMAN SUSVARA also knows how to hold its own in the frequency cellar, and always acts very confidently and in a controlled manner, but generates a little more volume, especially in the mid-bass range. Depending on the musical material, the bass reproduction of the SUSVARA seems a bit too full and in direct comparison also slightly softer. My wife is of course of a completely different opinion.

In the recent past, every dynamic headphone has failed due to the superior high-frequency reproduction of the HIFIMAN SUSVARA. The challengers of the ABYSS brand also regularly lost out in this respect. However, this could change today.

In my opinion, the ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC has a new quality, especially in the high frequency range. The virtuoso guitar playing "Mediterranean Sundance/Rio Ancho" by Al DiMeola, Paco DeLucia and John McLaughlin on the album "Friday Night In San Francisco", for example, occasionally tended the older ABYSS warriors somewhat to sharpness.

The HIFIMAN SUSVARA, on the other hand, behaves exemplary in this recording and doses the tweeter energy of the hard-core guitar riffs almost perfectly to ensure a dynamic balance in this frequency range at all times. As a result, the instruments also sound completely natural and genuine.

The new AB1266 PHI TC not only matches the SUSVARA in terms of an optimal connection to the upper mid-range, but also plays on the outstanding level of the HIFIMAN in terms of detail work in the current TC expansion stage in the high-frequency range. The somewhat problematic sibilant reproduction of the predecessors, especially at high volumes, is now a thing of the past.

Only in the final resolution of the finest musical shades can Dr. Fang Bian's headphones still claim slight advantages. Reverberation flags, for example, will last slightly longer, especially with first-class recordings. And, of course, a little more beautiful, as my wife has just remarked.

Nevertheless, I come to an important conclusion. In this "comparison test" there is no real loser. And therefore no clear winner. The final knock-out does not take place. Because neither of the two protagonists actually afford acoustically relevant weaknesses. Both headphones are too close together in sound, so that in the vast majority of cases the individual taste of each Knight of the Grail will decide this duel.

Nevertheless, I personally prefer the new ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC, as it has the driver cabinets slightly in front in the disciplines of bass quality, three-dimensionality and dynamics that are decisive for me.

In the sound-critical midrange, both headphones are on the same level in terms of transparency and naturalness, and I could probably do without the ultimate resolution of the HIFIMAN SUSVARA in the upper tweeter range.

Fortunately, I don't have to, as my wife would leave me with the SUSVARA if I ever succumbed to the madness of selling her favorite headphones in a mental breakdown. So practically an unthinkable scenario.

In the following, I have summarized the individual criteria regarding the reproduction characteristics of the ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC for you in a short overview.

BASS

Incredible depth for a headphone. Extremely powerful midrange bass with outstanding structuring. Dust dry response in the upper bass. And it's really fast. This bass is phenomenal.

BASE

Neutral fundamental range without emphasis. Always has exactly the right amount of substance and body. Paired with an almost perfect tonality. Top.

MIDS

Transparently drawn through, but at the same time extremely plastic midrange with wonderfully natural timbres. Optimum transient reproduction. Exemplary authenticity in voices and instruments. Simply magnificent.

HIGHS

Excellent detail work and very high resolution. At the same time a relaxed reproduction of sibilants. Completely seamless connection to the upper midrange. Realistic reverberation flags. Great class.

SPACE

Three-dimensional sound space with incomprehensible extension in width and depth. Outstanding separation of voices and instruments with absolutely precise focusing. Razor-sharp change. It couldn't be better.

DYNAMICS

Ideal combination of fine dynamic response and explosive coarse dynamics. No detectable compression at all audible level settings. Ghostly real live atmosphere. Thus a really first-class and impressive presentation of the new ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC.

Wait, there was something else? That's right, the thing with the cables. Well, any change in this highly sensitive reproduction chain, be it the change of the digital source, the exchange of the preamp tubes, or even a modification of the cable sets, undoubtedly leads IMO to a more or less clearly audible metamorphosis with regard to the acoustic quality.

And especially in combination with the SUPERCONDUCTOR cable set, the AB1266 PHI TC actually collects the last percentage points of sound in order to finally seize the throne of all ear loudspeakers. The noticeable differences

in connection with the SUPERCONDUCTOR stripping are not only marginal in nature - they are obvious.

This is particularly evident in an even more accurately structured bass, a slightly increased transparency in the midrange and a further improved resolution in the high frequencies. Hard to believe - but unfortunately true.

Not quite as impressive is the change of the standard cable of the HIFIMAN SUSVARA. Although of course the use of the CARDAS CLEAR also results in an audible improvement and the spatial representation in particular undoubtedly benefits from this replacement - but not to the same extent as with the ABYSS counterpart.

Now I certainly don't belong to the group of professed cable workmen. On the contrary. But the acoustic influence of the SUPERCONDUCTOR cable set on the sound qualities of the ABYSS headphones is simply not to be discussed away. As much as I would like to do this now perhaps because of the enormous surcharge compared to the LITE version.

Whether this investment is really worthwhile, probably every interested ABYSS customer has to decide for himself. But there is no doubt that these stripping can be the decisive icing on the cake in an ultimate playback chain.

Thus the large COMPLETE package opens up a completely new musical world to the searching Knight of the Grail, who is ready and willing to shoulder the monetary cable load additionally, in combination with the suitable playing partner, which I have not yet heard in this emotionally moving form. Big headphone cinema.

Conclusion

The new ABYSS AB1266 PHI TC is no less than a first-grade audiophile drug. In a musically adequate reproduction chain, it is the dream of every Knight of the Grail of fine sound, as long as he can come to terms with the appearance and weight of the mighty ear loudspeaker. A veritable endgame solution with absolute certainty.

And especially in combination with the COMPLETE package, the AB1266 PHI TC is for me personally probably the best headphones in the world at the moment. The mouse doesn't bite a thread off. My decision is very close. Depending on their personal taste, some of the Knights of the Grail may also choose the more intimate and somewhat more involved version of the

HIFIMAN. For example my wife. Which, of course, is fine. After all, dinner is served right away.

Thus for the first time an ABYSS ear loudspeaker takes over the regency in Olympus of the TOP10 on Musicalhead and replaces the HIFIMAN SUSVARA after now nearly two years in the succession to the throne. But at a proud price. Already the LITE version costs 5.450,- Euro, for the COMPLETE version even 8.590,- Euro are due. So it is no consolation that HIFIMAN also calls 7,000 Euro for the SUSVARA. Not to forget the 800,- Euro for the CARDAS CLEAR cabling.

But as Oskar Wilde already remarked over 100 years ago: "I have a very simple taste - I am always satisfied with the best". And, after all, the man must know.

Yours Fidelio

<https://musicalhead.de>