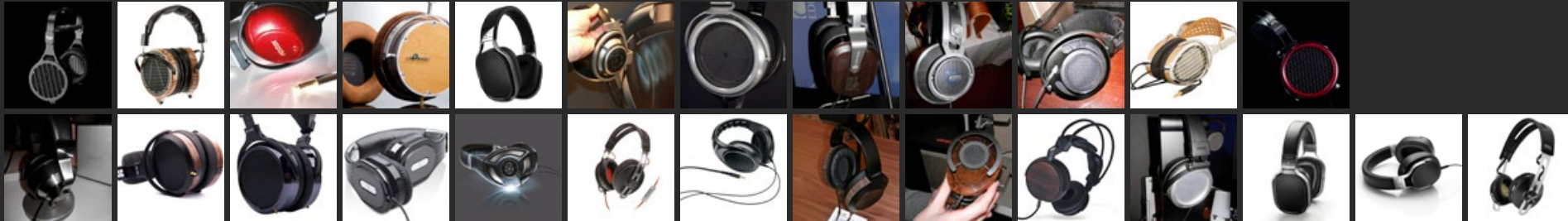


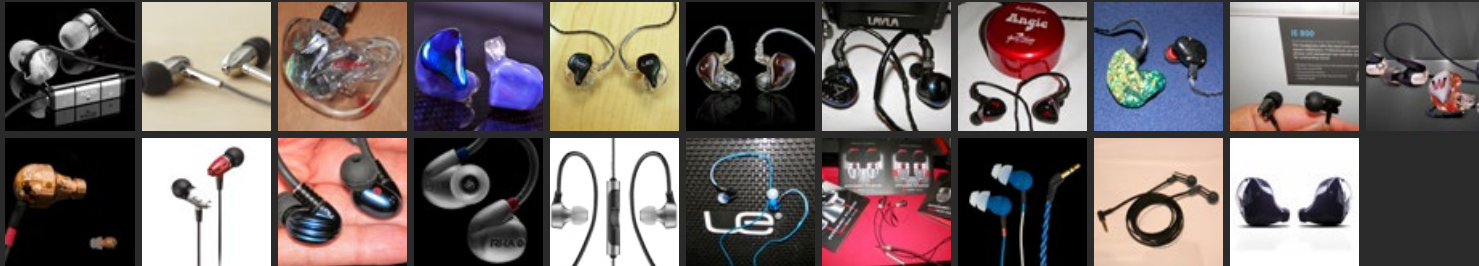


# EDITORS' CHOICE

## HEADPHONES



## EARPHONES & CIEMs sponsored by Noble Audio



## HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS & AMP/DACs sponsored by Celsus and NuPrime



CELSUS SOUND



NUPRIME

## HI-FI+ RECOMMENDED UPPER END HEADPHONES (\$1,000 AND UP)

### Abyss AB-1266 planar magnetic headphones

Abyss' handcrafted AB-1266 headphone offers exceptional sonic performance. Its strengths include high levels of transparency and resolution, neutral tonal balance tempered with a judicious (not overblown) touch of bass lift, extraordinarily revealing yet smooth midrange frequencies, and terrific dynamic expressiveness and power. The AB-1266's iconoclastic frame design and adjustable ear pad system are points of controversy; some find the Abyss quite comfortable, while others consider it too unorthodox to embrace. The Abyss is expensive and requires powerful, top-quality amplification, but if the fit works for you and you can afford the price of entry, expect a rare, exotic sonic treat.



### Audeze LCD-3 planar magnetic headphones

The flagship LCD-3 is not Audeze's newest headphone, but it arguably does more things right than any other Audeze model – especially in terms of resolving subtle musical details and nuances. The LCD-3 is easy to listen to owing to clear but gentle-sounding highs, a wide-open midrange, and hearty, beautifully defined bass. Build quality is high, as evidenced by the LCD-3's exotic hardwood ear cups. The LCD-3 is not particularly light, but it is easy to adjust and comfortable to wear, although some might find clamping pressures a bit high. The moderately sensitive LCD-3 requires refined but not excessively powerful amplification.



### Fostex TH-900 dynamic headphones

Until the TH-900, Fostex was best known for its pro and semi-pro recorders, but this high-quality closed-backed dynamic headphone surprised everyone with its high performance, comfort, and refined styling. With a 1.5Tesla, 50mm dynamic driver, the TH-900 has class-leading bass response, and outstanding treble performance. However, it is engineered not to sound like a studio monitor, and has a deliberately laid-back midrange, and the sumptuous red "Urushi" lacquered ear cups are less sealed than most engineers would like. But this all combines to make a headphone that is as easy to listen to as it is to wear for long sessions.



### oBravo HAMT-1 hybrid dynamic/AMT headphones

At first glance, the oBravo HAMT-1 might look like any other headphone, but in addition to a conventional dynamic driver, it also features a Heil Air Motion Transformer-type driver, the kind used as high-end tweeters for top loudspeaker brands like Adam Audio, Burmester, ELAC, and GoldenEar Technology. The elegant wood, metal, and velour headphone (supplied in its own flight case) sounds more like a high-end loudspeaker than many headphone systems, conveying a sense of dynamism and musical intent to the performances being reproduced. The HAMT-1's bass can also be adjusted through a series of user-replaceable silicone bungs, but before making adjustments, make sure you first give the headphones plenty of run-in time (they will need this to sound their best).



## HI-FI+ RECOMMENDED UPPER END HEADPHONES (\$1,000 AND UP)

### Oppo PM-1 planar magnetic headphones

Oppo's top-of-the-range PM-1 headphone offers several distinctive design touches, including a diaphragm featuring conductive traces on both its front and rear surfaces – a detail that makes the PM-1 markedly more sensitive and easier to drive than its planar magnetic competitors. The PM-1's sound is highly dependent upon which of several available ear pads are installed. With standard pads, the PM-1 sounds rich and relaxing, but somewhat darker and less open sounding than some might prefer. However, with Oppo's Rev 2 ear pads installed the sound becomes much more neutrally balanced, transparent, and revealing. The PM-1 offers superb ergonomics, fit, and finish.



### Sennheiser HD-800 dynamic headphones

Six years after its launch, the open-backed dynamic Sennheiser HD-800 is still one of the best detail retrievers available, although extremely careful choice of upstream equipment is required to prevent all that detail tipping over into brightness. Large, lightweight drive units inside the extremely comfortable ear cups give the HD-800 class-leading dynamics and volume headroom. Unlike most headphone and loudspeaker systems, that volume headroom is so significant that your amplifier (and your ears) may give up long before the HD-800 begins to struggle. The king of dynamics from Sennheiser shows little sign of being dethroned, and the HD-800 remains a true reference point.



### Stax SR-009 electrostatic headphones

Stax has been the choice of headphones of discerning music lovers for many years, and for good reason; the Japanese maker of electrostatic headphones has stuck to its guns, producing a range of energizer-powered models, right up to this, the SR-009 flagship. The Stax sound is one of great fidelity to the source, and in the SR-009 that fidelity takes on 'absolute' levels. It's like walking into the studio, or the concert hall, without any of the overhang, colouration, or bloating heard in other system. The SR-009 demands a good a purpose-built electrostatic headphone amplifier, but you won't hear a better sound from audio!



### Ultrasonne Limited Edition 5 dynamic headphones

Unlike other high-end headphones, which place high demands on the upstream amplification, Ultrasonne designs its headphones to be efficient enough to be powered by a smartphone or tablet. The Edition 5 is the company's latest and greatest exponent of its S-Logic EX technology, which is designed to minimize lateralization effects, making the sound appear as if coming from studio monitors in front of the listener. Just 555 pairs of Ultrasonne Edition 5 Limited have been made and most are already sold, but there's an Unlimited version that eschews the 'Bog Oak' wood and Ethiopian sheep leather, without a performance sacrifice.



HI-FI+ MODELS 2 WATCH: UPPER END HEADPHONES (\$1,000 AND UP)

**AKG K812 dynamic headphone**

What's the draw? Although the open-back K812 is available only through AKG's pro audio sales channels (not its consumer audio channels), it is arguably the most audiophile-worthy of all current production AKG headphones. In fact, it just might be the best dynamic driver-equipped AKG model produced to date: Balanced, open, and transparent in a way that AKG's earlier K7xx series models could not match.



**ENIGMAcoustics Dharma hybrid dynamic/electrostatic headphone**

What's the draw? ENIGMAcoustics' ingenious Dharma headphone combines dynamic bass/midrange driver power and dynamic expressiveness with the exquisite transparency of an electrostatic high-frequency driver. Better still, its self-energising electrostatic driver does not need a dedicated electrostatic amp; it can be powered directly from conventional headphone amplifiers. A preliminary listen suggests that the Dharma can produce soundstages of remarkable 3D realism.



**HiFiMAN HE-1000**

What's the draw? HiFiMAN has made many great planar magnetic headphones in the past, but with the HE-1000 it is pulling out all the stops in order to push performance limits as never before. The HE-1000 features a new frame design, new ear cup design, and an all-new planar dynamic driver whose diaphragm—for the first time ever—is based on ultra low mass nanomaterial. An initial listen led us to think the HE-1000 may well be one of the most (if not the most) accurate, well balanced, fast, and extraordinarily transparent headphones on the planet.



**MrSpeakers ETHER**

What's the draw? Up to this point, the San Diego-based firm MrSpeakers has earned a sterling reputation for the sound quality offered by its Mad Dog/Alpha Dog-series planar magnetic headphones, which have all been extensively modified/re-worked Fostex TR50p headphones (although you might never guess this on the basis of the sonic results MrSpeaker has achieved). With the ETHER, however, we have the first headphone manufactured in its entirety by MrSpeakers and the first open-back, cost-no-object design the firm has ever produced. Initial listening impressions suggest that is an open, expressive, and beautifully balanced headphone with very low colouration. It is also remarkably light and comfortable to wear.

