



In-ear masterpiece

The headphone giant has revised its flagship in-ear monitor. **Ed Selley** checks it out to see if it offers aural excellence

If you want a physical manifestation of the upward pricing trend of the in-ear headphone market, then the set you see here is a pretty good fit. Founded in 1945, Sennheiser has long been seen as a big gun in the headphone sector, but doesn't typically exploit niches or indulge flights of fancy – the designs it makes are because it feels there is a market for them. When it launched the original £600 IE 800 flagship (HFC 385) around four years ago, it was because it believed there was a real demand for such a thing. Clearly, the German specialist feels there's an ongoing desire for upmarket in-ear designs as it's recently been replaced by the IE 800 S and priced at an even

more eye-popping £870, which at first glance may well be over stretching all value for money calculations. To the casual eye it doesn't look like very much has changed from the original IE 800. The IE 800 S is fairly unusual in the ranks of high-end in-ear headphones because it doesn't make use of balanced armature drivers, either singularly or (as is more common) in multiple driver arrangements. Instead, each enclosure uses a single dynamic driver. This driver is 7mm and is designed to Sennheiser's Extra Wide Bandwidth (XWB) principles. This isn't idle marketing puff either as the claimed response is 5Hz to 46kHz, which is greater than most multi-driver rivals can manage. Sennheiser argues that

the crossover arrangement needed to make multiple driver designs work correctly can introduce timing errors and artefacts into the presentation that are avoided by adopting a single-driver design. To make this setup function, time has been spent on the enclosure and the result is a shape that represents the most effective space possible to allow the driver to operate efficiently. In the IE 800 S, this has been augmented by a system the company calls D2CA – a dual chambered absorbing system intended to even out the frequency response and ensure low-level detail isn't lost in the mix or dominated by the more obvious parts of the performance. The enclosure itself is made from ceramic and is designed to be as inert as possible while still relatively light and compact. As with the IE 800 original, but relatively unusually for an in-ear at

The revisions to the new model give it an incredible grasp of soundstaging

this price, the new flagship has captive cable attachments at the housing ends – something that leaves them potentially vulnerable to being snagged and damaged. To minimise the chances of this happening, Sennheiser provides a stress break point halfway down the cable to allow it to easily separate if snagged. The lower section of the cable is supplied in conventional 3.5mm and balanced 2.5 and 4.4mm connections. This latter fitting is particularly interesting as it makes the IE 800 S the first design I've encountered that will work with the balanced output socket on Sony's NW-WM1A Walkman (HFC 430) outside of the Japanese company's own headphone designs. Aesthetically, the standard of finish is high and very close to its predecessor – although, it could be argued that it looks a bit more restrained as the steel finishers for the rear ports are no longer in brushed steel and are now in black to match the rest of the housing. I am sure that some people might want a bit more visual flair considering the cost, but spend a little time with it and the price begins to make more sense. Firstly, those enclosures really are beautifully made and finished. They feel incredibly solid and the equal of anything else I've seen at this or any other price. There are some other nice touches too. The high-quality leather

carry case is a masterpiece in terms of practical usability and convenience. The in-ear is comfortable to wear for long listening periods and unlike its predecessor, the IE 800 S is also available with Comply tips, which will appeal to those seeking the best seal in the ear canal.

Sound quality

In some respects, performance mirrors its appearance. Having been left to run in for a few days, the first impression when connected to a Chord Electronics Hugo 2 portable headphone amp/DAC (HFC 428) fed by a signal from a Melco N1A NAS drive (HFC 397) is that this is a competent and capable in-ear design but doesn't necessarily raise the game above the standard set by Audeze's iSINE 10 (HFC 423) at less than half the price. One aspect that does stand out from the outset is that it is a usefully sensitive design, and the Hugo 2 needs very little of its output to reach a decent volume level. However, given some time to properly run in, the IE 800 S begins to show its outstanding ability. A 24/192 download of Jimmy Eat World's *Bleed American* is deceptive in its simplicity as the Sennheiser effortlessly unpicks the interplay between the bandmates and delivers the album with a spaciousness and depth that is truly extraordinary for an in-ear design. The original was no slouch in this regard, but the revisions that have been made to the new model have given it a truly incredible grasp of soundstaging. What goes on within this soundstage is no less singular. In practise, there are rival designs (take a bow Noble, Shure, Final and Westone) that can match the frequency response of the IE 800 S, but the sheer coherence of it being produced from a single driver is what gives it the edge. With

3.5mm and balanced 2.5 and 4.4mm connectors are all bundled



rhythmically complex material like Amadou & Mariam's *Filou Bessame*, there is a precision and fundamental rightness to the way that it follows the bassline that can make even very talented rivals seem heavy footed by comparison. It is important to stress that it will not pep up less exciting sources or material – it will simply do exactly what it is told, but if the energy is present in the source the IE 800 S will replicate it. There is some serious heft to the low end too and it manages the neat trick of generating bass that you can feel as much as hear, but it never overwhelms the upper registers. Indeed, from top to bottom it comes across as almost perfectly flat – as close to the notional ideal of a loudspeaker as you are likely to encounter outside of a textbook. Of course, something this effortlessly transparent won't have too much

trouble showing the flaws in less than perfect material, but I'm surprised at just how benign this tends to be. Rather than highlighting the limitations of the slightly shouty *The Desired Effect* album by Brandon Flowers, the IE 800 S almost apologetically reveals the top end to be ragged and a little thin. **Conclusion** For me, this is part of what makes this more than just a seriously good in-ear and places it up there with the true greats. When you are willing to put the effort in and partner it with a decent source and high-quality material, it is spectacularly good. What sets it apart from most of its rivals is that it demands so little of the wearer, making it quite possibly the very best in-ear headphone on the planet and a tremendous engineering achievement ●

DETAILS
PRODUCT
 Sennheiser IE 800 S
ORIGIN
 Germany
TYPE
 In-ear headphone
WEIGHT
 8g
FEATURES
 • Driver type: 7mm dynamic
 • 3x 1.2m detachable balanced and unbalanced cables
 • Leather carry case
DISTRIBUTOR
 Sennheiser UK
TELEPHONE
 0333 2408185
WEBSITE
 en-uk.sennheiser.com

IN SIGHT

1 7mm dynamic driver
 2 Interchangeable cable section
 3 Ceramic housings

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
 ★★★★★
LIKE: Comfort, sonic performance, beautiful build quality

VALUE FOR MONEY
 ★★★★★
DISLIKE: Doesn't flatter poor material; high price

BUILD QUALITY
 ★★★★★
WE SAY: Expensive, but one of the most complete in-ear headphone designs we've heard

FEATURES
 ★★★★★

OVERALL
 ★★★★★