

Audeze LCD-XC Headphones

August is « Headphone Month » at Hifi Pig and so where better to start this series of reviews than with what must surely be one of the most expensive and talked about pair of cans on the market today...



Price: £1.500

You can't explore the world of headphones too far without coming across the Californian manufacturer Audeze sooner or later as they seem to be just everywhere. I'd been speaking to Jonathan Scull who handles the Audeze PR in the US for a good while on social media and finally managed to get hold of a pair of their LCD-XC headphones whilst at Munich High-End earlier this year.

The £1500 (1799 USD) Audeze arrived in a well padded, moulded plastic carrying case that looks all but bombproof and is a neat solution for transporting the headphones from place to place. Along with the headphones there's a useful quarter inch to minijack adaptor that I think thoughtful addition to the pack. The 2.5m cable attaches to each of the cans via a mini XLR jack with a rugged quarter inch jack on the amp end... I believe a number of aftermarket alternatives are available for those looking to explore this particular route. Overall this packaging really does it for me as it is both practical and attractive in an industrial kind of way – it certainly screams high-end. If you are buying these headphones you'll also get a wood care kit, some warranty documents in the box, plus you can also send away to Audeze and they will supply you with a personalised frequency response graph for your new headphones.



The LCD-XC are the second to top price-wise of the Audeze hierarchy and are the companies only closed back design. Like the HifiMan HE560s the Audeze are a planar magnetic design and they have a 38.9cm sq diaphragm. However, they are a heavy headphone

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tipping the scales at 650g which is considerably heavier than any of the headphones we have in for review. Appearance-wise the LCD-XC are BIG and, despite their luxurious Bubinga wood cups and lamb skin earpads, their looks will certainly divide opinion... I think they look pretty cool and have a retro sort of vibe about them. Needless to say at this price point the Audeze headphones are for serious headphone enthusiasts and whilst their closed-back design certainly isolates you from the world and it from your music, I'm not sure I'd personally feel comfortable hopping on the bus with them strapped to my head... but if you do I'm sure you'll get both the odd "what the hell" gawp as well as a few admiring glances. That said I did wear them pretty much non-stop for the ten hour train journey from Munich to Paris and despite their weight I found them fairly comfortable for the whole journey.

The cans themselves are big and cover the whole of my ears and the earpads are very thick and very comfortable indeed with no sense of them rubbing, itching or becoming sweaty. The earpads are thicker at the back than they are at the front in the same way the HifiMan HE 560s are...only more so. They press fairly tightly onto your head and to some extent your face, but they do move around a bit when you shake your head about. The headband adjusts fairly simply to the correct size and is pretty comfortable given their weight, though not as comfortable as some of the other headphones we have reviewed.

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The LCD-XC are 20ohms and have a sensitivity of 95dB and seemed to be easy to drive, though I opted to use my reference headphone amp over the output on the reference preamp. With the little HiSound Studio portable player and our son's iPod they went loud enough, but there seemed to be a little missing and I'd suggest a good quality portable headphone amplifier to be the order of the day whether at home or on the go.

The Sound

The first thing that grabs you about the Audeze is the size of the sound, the second is that you are completely isolated from the outside world and all you hear is the music. There's certainly a good impression of the soundstage and out-the-head feeling and instruments sit within the mix as they should with fabulous separation and space. I'd suggest the soundstaging is better than the Final Hope VIs which surprised me given the Audeze's closed back design and I can only put this down to the fact the actual drivers



are a way from your ears – whatever, it's pretty impressive.

There seems to be a greater weight to the music with these 'phones across the frequency range and popping on David Crosby's "Croze" there's simply more detail than with any of the other phones we have in for test. Drums have dynamism with the toms being precise and hard hitting, whilst bass kick hits and then stops with no overhang. Bass guitar is tight,

punchy and plays along with the drums to create great rhythm.

Sonically on this kind of music it's really hard to fault the Audeze LCD-XC and it's difficult not to perhaps suggest that these are the best headphones I've ever heard...but then that would make for a pretty short review and there's an awful lot of 'phones I've yet to experience.

Despite how gorgeously the Audeze 'phones play the likes of David Crosby I found myself pulling loads of harder edged rock from the virtual shelf. There just a feeling that the Audeze bring a dynamic feel to this kind of music that really makes it...rock. I know this is petty vague but, apart from the weight of the phones, you can forget to some extent you're wearing headphones at all. The grunge sounds of Bush's "Everything Zen" is visceral and raw and this is down to the way the LCD-XCs do dynamics. If you like rock then you're gonna really enjoy these headphones, just be careful about the headbanging as you'll end up with a severe case of "Headbangers Neck".

Fleetwood Mac's "Songbird" is one of the tracks I use to listen to how a bit of new kit puts out the feel of a room's space as it's recorded on a large stage in an empty hall and with the Audeze you get a really good sense of the space. It's not as pronounced as with good loudspeakers, but then it was never going to be. When the dry kick of "The Chain" (the next tune on the record) comes in it sounds correct and when the rhythm section gets going there's speed and control displayed that drives the beat – other headphones we've reviewed have speed and control, but I can honestly say it's a notch above both the Hi-FiMan HE 560s and the Sennheiser HD800s with the Audeze in place.

On electronic music the bass lines are deep, whilst all the little intricate noises and effects come through... and then there's the kick drum which gets me to thinking perhaps the bass is a little over done on these headphones. I toyed with this concept a good while and came to the conclusion after listening to loads of tunes that it's not over done, it's just powerful and the 'phones are capable of giving a great sense of what they are actually playing across the frequencies – there just seems to be more of everything.

Comfort

These are heavy headphones and you do know you are wearing them, particularly when sat typing I

found as I lean forward to look at the keyboard which led to a little neck ache, but they're also pretty comfortable all-round when sat in your armchair.

The headband is well padded and comfortable over long periods (though not as comfortable as the HifiMans nor perhaps the Sennheisers mentioned) and whilst the cans are big and do press onto your face a bit you get used to it.

For long periods of listening I found the earpads were very comfortable with no irritation as with the HifiMan HE 560s, but they were certainly less com-

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fortable than the Sennheiser HD800s over longer periods. As with most things you lose with one thing and gain with another.

Conclusion

£1500 is in most people's book a good chunk to throw down on a pair of headphones and yet the Audeze seem to be selling very well, so clearly there are people out there who can justify this kind of expenditure.

This is both an audiophile product and a luxe product and when thinking about them you need to keep this in mind. The fit and finish is very good and there's the attention to little details that set them apart from the competition.

I suppose the question that needs to be asked is does the extra expenditure bring you a suitable increase in perceived sound quality and whilst I'd suggest that there's the dreaded law of diminishing returns coming in to play here, these are none the less a very, very good headphone indeed.

There's something almost unfathomable about the Audeze LCD-XCs that stands them apart from the crowd. Yes they do stonking basslines with aplomb, but they also manage to temper this with being able to be subtle where required. No one area of the music

stands out and to me they seem almost perfectly balanced, giving a wonderfully musical experience.

If headphones are your only source and you want the best then you ought to audition these immediately! If you don't have this kind of money to splurge then there are alternatives for you (look out for lots of reviews in the days to come), but be aware you may be missing out on that nth degree of magic.

Stuart Smith

Sound – 9.25

Comfort – 8.00

Fit and finish – 9.00

Value – 8.00

Overall – 8.56

Recommended for those wanting a no compro-



mise headphone listening experience.

And now Linette's thoughts on the Audeze LCD-XC headphones.

I had been itching to get my hands on (and ears in) these headphones since we picked them up at Munich. They very much seem to be the audiophile flavour of the month and I wanted to find out for myself if they lived up to the hype.

They have a very different look to them than most headphones with their Bubinga wood cups and black lambskin earpads, they look like they mean serious business, especially as they come in a very robust 'ruggedized' carry case...resembles something that

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Ironman might use to take his butties to work. There is a definite air of ‘manliness’ about them.

Picking them up it was a case of ‘whoa, these are REALLY heavy!’ (650g according to the Audeze website)

I had visions of developing a neck like an F1 driver if I wore them for any length of time...surely these were headphones for big, beefy men, not a delicate flower like myself!

Putting them on for the first time made me realise that although they weigh a lot for a pair of headphones, they are actually perfectly balanced and extremely comfortable.

It’s kind of like having your head firmly hugged. The leather earpads are exceptionally soft and probably the most comfortable I have ever felt on a pair of ‘phones. They sit nicely around the ears with no ‘lobe crush’ or hard bits digging into you, plus the headband is well padded and caused no discomfort and I could leave my glasses on without them being pushed into the side of my head.....I was impressed!

It felt like sinking into your favourite, soft leather armchair.....cocooning is probably a good word to describe them....and I hadn’t even turned the tunes on yet!

So have these headphones got it all? Well crafted, comfortable and incredibly engaging to listen to.....and then there’s the elephant in the room ...the price.

So enough about how these feel, how do they sound? First impressions were great and I spent quite a bit of time listening to tunes from my laptop, particularly memorable was a stream of Carl Cox DJing at Space in IbizaI scribbled down the notes ‘feels like a nightclub on my head’ which just about says it all!

On goes Hardfloor’s ‘Once again back’. This is my go to track to test out a system, it’s especially tricky

with deep sub bass, swirling 303s and skippy top end. It is a track that has the possibility to make things sound terrible if they are not up to the job. With the Audeze the bass was dynamic and interesting, not just a splodge of sound...great definition and that proper ‘in the music’ feeling.

I really love Rudimental, their album ‘Home’ gets a lot of play here, I have a lot of respect for a dance act that can play and sing live and have a real horn section.

This is uplifting music, hands in the air time and I got a big case of goosebumps listening to tracks like ‘Feel the love’ and ‘Right Here’. With the Audeze I



got a sense of just wanting to sit and listen and not actually do anything else.

I do love a bit of disco so appropriately ‘Lost in music’ by Sister Sledge went on next. Driving bass, funky guitar and breathy, sweet vocals all sounded perfect. The sound stage with the Audeze is big and 3 dimensional and I get the feeling that I am really hearing what I should be hearing...this almost as good as listening to the main system to my ears.

Still feeling the Nile Rogers vibe I put on ‘Get Lucky’ from Daft Punk. Again, funky and crystal clear ...I’ve heard this tune many, many times but I’m hearing things in the backing vocals that I haven’t heard ever before...fantastic detail.

A bit of Gil Scott Heron and his ‘Ghetto Style’ album next and once again I’m struck by the depth and clarity I’m getting from the music, there is a real

sense of where each of the artists is playing or singing in the soundstage and little nuances in the backing vocals and from the drums that I haven't heard brought out so well before.

So have these headphones got it all? Well crafted, comfortable and incredibly engaging to listen to.....and then there's the elephant in the room ...the price.

At around 1800 US\$, and retailing around £1500 in the UK, these are not cheap headphones by any stretch of the imagination.

But have a think about it. Would you balk at spending over a grand and a half on a pair of loudspeakers? Probably not. Probably, if you are an audiophile, you would be happy to spend quite a bit more than that.

But what if you have a love of listening to your favourite music, on your great hifi....and you have neighbours who just don't share your enthusiasm? Short of becoming the vilified 'Neighbour From Hell' what options do you have?

And I guess this is where exceptional sounding, in-

credibly well-made, expensive headphones come in. I wouldn't use these to walk about in, or go jogging in, they really aren't made for that (for a start the Ironman Lunchbox would be a bit inconvenient to cart about) I would wear them to sit down, chill out and get lost in music. Perfect playback of your tunes, from your desktop system or from your main hifi, even when you can't crank up the volume using your speakers.

The Audeze LCD-XC certainly live up to the hype.

Linette Smith

Sound – 9/10

Comfort – 9/10

Fit and finish – 9/10

Value – 8/10

Overall – 8.75/10

Highly recommended as an exceptionally well made extremely comfortable, enjoyable to listen to headphone, for those wanting an alternative to using loudspeakers in the home or who want the best from a desktop system.