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Audeze headphones: Redefining the state of the art?

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The Audeze LCD-2 headphones

I've never heard anything quite like the Audeze LCD-2 before. This headphone somehow produces extraordinary clarity, openness, and articulation, but without exaggerated detail or annoyingly overdone treble. The Audeze LCD-2 is a game changer; no wonder it's getting raves from the online high-end mavens at Head-Fi. Audeze's co-founders, Alex Rosson and Sankar Thiagasamudram, are onto something.

The headphones feel great in your hands. Build quality is robust, but the design is nowhere as sleek as Sennheiser's high-end headphones. The LCD-2's impedance is 50 ohms, and the maximum power handling is a remarkable 15 watts, which corresponds to a superloud 133 decibel output! You'd be hard pressed to blow this headphone up by playing it too loud. The

LCD-2's tonal balance is noticeably warm, but I never felt it was smearing detail or lacking in resolution. It also sounds great at quiet listening levels. Sure, one of the advantages of headphones is you can play music as loud as you want, but it's still nice to have the option of listening low, without losing detail or presence.

The LCD-2's unusual technology (planar magnetic, or orthodynamic) is currently only used by one other headphone manufacturer, Hifiman, and I raved about its HE-5 headphones last year. The LCD-2's huge headphone drivers (6.17 square inches each) are many times the area of any dynamic headphone I know of. Audeze's very large drivers project sound over most of your outer ears, and that may be the reason why the LCD-2 sounds more speakerlike than other headphones. It weighs a rather hefty 19.4 ounces (550 grams), but I found it comfortable over very long listening sessions. The LCD-2 is handmade in the U.S., with real lambskin leather-covered earpads, and real Caribbean rosewood earcups.

The LCD-2's headphone cable is detachable, via very secure mini-XLR plugs, and is therefore user replaceable. I opted for a Chain Mail 8, an audiophile upgrade cable from ALO. It seemed to enhance everything about the LCD-2's sound, which was awfully good with the stock cable.

The LCD-2's big drivers make bass, oh boy, do they make bass. If you really want to hear amazing bass, you have to get "Kodo: The Heartbeat Drummers of Japan" CD. The drums' big sound is beyond the abilities of most headphones, but here, over the LCD-2, the drumbeats were clear and powerful. Not the sort of flabby, thick, or overdone bass you get from DJ headphones, no, I'm talking about pitch-accurate, highly defined bass that also digs deeper into the very low bass regions than other full-size 'phones.

Neil Young & Crazy Horse's "Ragged Glory" CD put a big smile on my face. Young's wall of (intended) guitar distortion spread out in front of me, and the band's joyful abandon came through loud and clear. The last track, "Mother Earth," was recorded live at Hoosier Dome, with additional vocals mixed in at a later date. Young's fiery guitar rose out of the mix, and the full chorus provided spine-tingling accompaniment. The LCD-2's vivid presentation can only be matched by the very best, and vastly more expensive speaker systems.

African superstar King Sunny Ade's "Live! Live Juju" sounded remarkably live, as if it were being performed as I listened. Even with a stage filled with 20 musicians stomping their feet and playing a vast assortment of percussion instruments and chanting along with Ade's vocals, it was easy to follow individual players. Percussive accents were rendered in a natural, unhyped way, which was in large part responsible for the believability of the sound. This LP was recorded in the late 1980s with a special (Calrec) microphone, which preserved the spatial relationships of the musicians on the stage. I've never heard a headphone produce that aspect of sound before. Switching over to any other full-size headphone flattened the sound, rendering it more 2D and less realistic.

I next compared the LCD-2 with my Hifiman HE-5 headphones, and found the LCD-2 superior in every way. They're both planar magnetic designs, but differ in design details, and the LCD-2 was richer in balance, more open, and lower in distortion. The LCD-2 is more expensive and a newer design. But I'm not counting Hifiman out just yet; it's readying a

higher-end model that will compete directly with the LCD-2, and I will review that set when it's available early next year.

These listening tests were conducted over a variety of headphone amplifiers, but the two standouts were the Red Wine Audio Isabellina HPA LFP-V Edition (review to come) and the Woo Audio WA-6SE. The \$399 Hifiman EF5 was the budget amp champ with the LCD-2.

To finish up I plugged the LCD-2 into my iPod Classic and Hifiman HM-801 players, and the sound was still very good, so it's nice to know you can use this state-of-the-art headphone with just about anything.

The LCD-2 sells for \$945. Right, that's a lot of money, but it outshines my previous pick for ultimate headphone sound, the Woo Audio WES headphone amplifier (\$4,500) and Stax SR-007Mk2 headphone (\$2,410) on at least two counts. I didn't have them on hand for a direct comparison, but I'm pretty sure the LCD-2 exceeds the Woo/Stax's dynamic impact and bass power.

Audeze is making just this one design, but don't worry, the company will offer more-affordable headphones in the future. In the here and now, Audeze can't build LCD-2s fast enough, and there's a one-month waiting list. Audeze sells direct, and will be adding a few dealers soon (32 Ohm Audio, Headroom, ALO Audio, and Todd the Vinyl Junkie).