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on writing for  
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# HIGH FIDELITY

THE TECHNOLOGY THAT MAKES THE MOST OF YOUR MUSIC



THIS MONTH Headphone listening – pleasure or necessity? Plus high-end personal listening from Austria; and class-conscious amplifiers  
**Andrew Everard,**  
Audio Editor

### JUNE TEST RECORDINGS



A powerful, dramatic sound enhances the scintillating performances on this set from the always reliable LSO Live label



A fabulous intimacy and superb instrumental detail serve well this set of Mendelssohn and more from Sol Gabetta and Bertrand Chamayou

### ESSAY

## Time to get personal?

Having of late spent more time than usual listening to headphones and their ancillaries, **Andrew Everard** is beginning to understand more the appeal of 'head-fi'

Reviewing hi-fi for a living brings about some unique experiences, from the opportunity to hear some very exotic equipment to experimenting with the latest budget products creating a buzz online. But it also means one undergoes the kind of shifts of gear – if you'll pardon the pun – most listeners never encounter.

For example, the other day I went from sitting in front of a pair of high-end speakers driven by similarly costly electronics – total cost well into six figures – to being back at my desk with a little amplifier connected to my computer, powering a pair of high-end headphones, and finding I could enjoy the finer points of recording and reproduction with both set-ups. Well, rather more with the latter, 'personal audio', system: the listening room where I'd heard the high-end set-up suffered from kitchen-fitters working somewhere close nearby, and I had to do some negotiation to get some breaks into the work so I could concentrate.

It wasn't the first time the requirements of my occupation have clashed with the men wielding the Makitas: one of my next-door neighbours seems to greet every Bank Holiday or quiet Sunday morning as the time to fire up the drill, and of course the arrival of warmer weather means windows open – and the Flymo morning chorus. Even if I keep the volume of the system down, especially in the evenings, there's no guarantee that someone won't be firing up the power tools in close proximity, or indeed playing their own music at an excessive level.



Naim: a company committed to headphones

Headphones have been the answer ever since I started listening to music: back when I was a teenager, they were a way of listening to the music I enjoyed the way I wanted it. They could play loud without a huge investment in hardware, and avoided those inevitable shouts of 'Will you turn that row down!' followed by the pounding of parental footsteps heading up the stairs to reinforce the order, and as a student they gave me the chance to shut the world out and concentrate on reading or writing with some calming or inspiring music.

I had friends who got their thrills playing opera at a level able to be heard filling the college courtyards, but I preferred plugging in and keeping it to myself, which also avoided a repeat of the parental ire, but this time from bowler-hatted college porters!

With a home of my own, the headphones increasingly took a back seat, and I've long been convinced that music sounds more real when it's filling a room from a good pair of speakers, and given space to breathe and blend, as the sound of real instruments do in a natural acoustic. Headphones, I'd concluded, were fine when travelling, or

when circumstances forced me to use them to avoid disturbing, or being disturbed by, others, but were more of a necessity in those circumstances than a pleasure to be sought out.

Of late, however, my attitude has changed from 'oh, if I must' to an appreciation that listening to headphones is different, but potentially just as enjoyable. I've realised that this whole 'head-fi' thing isn't about getting decent sound on the cheap; instead, it's possible to get a truly compelling level of performance, but only if you're prepared to spend much the same as you would on a high-quality amplifier and speakers set-up.

For example, the Austrian Audio package of headphones and partnering amplifier I review this month will set you back getting on for £4000, and the alternative I suggest, from Naim and Focal, is not much less than that. By any standards, that's a lot of money just to listen to headphones, but if you discount the 'just to' aspect of headphone listening, and adopt it as your primary choice, it's hard not to acknowledge that the sound these set-ups offer is a long way beyond a typical iPhone and iPods combination. Take on board that the Apple-centric system, in the form of a higher-spec iPhone 15 Pro Max – with a big screen good for older eyes and a decent amount of storage for your music – and AirPods Pro earphones, is going to set you back almost half as much, and the top-quality home headphones set-up starts making more sense. And it's even more logical when you hear the definition, impact and musical involvement it can deliver. **G**

## REVIEW PRODUCT OF THE MONTH

# Austrian Audio's The Composer

The name may be unfamiliar, but the heritage is impeccable – and these flagship headphones are a revelation when driven with their matching high-quality amplification



### THE COMPOSER

**Type** Headphones  
**Price** £2249  
**Drivers** 49mm carbon-coated  
**Design** Over ear, open back  
**Frequency response** 5Hz-44kHz  
**Sensitivity** 112dB/V  
**Impedance** 22ohms  
**Accessories included** 3m cables with 3.5mm and balanced XLR plugs, 1.4m cable with 4.4mm Pentaconn, 3.5-6.3mm adapter, storage box  
**Dimensions** (WxHxD) 21.5 x 20 x 9cm  
**Weight** (without cable) 385g

### FULL SCORE ONE

**Type** Headphone amplifier  
**Price** £1299  
**Inputs** RCA phono, XLR  
**Outputs** Two 6.3mm unbalanced, XLR balanced  
**Output power** 19 dBV, 9Vrms  
**Output impedance** 10-600ohm  
**Dimensions** (WxHxD) 22x6.5x26.5cm

**austrian.audio**  
 UK distribution **henleyaudio.co.uk**

The Austrian Audio brand may be new to many readers, but in fact the company, based in Vienna, has been in business since 2017, and its roots go back much further – another 70 years, in fact. The current company came into being when the celebrated AKG brand, until then proudly Austrian, was bought out by Harman International in 1994, the new owners announcing in 2016 that its headquarters, manufacturing, and engineering operations in Vienna would be closed, and transferred to California, with production moved to Harman's overseas factories.

The move left behind a pool of staff, 22 of whom decided to continue their work under the Austrian Audio name. This group had skills encompassing management, acoustics, electronics, test and measurement, mechanical design, wireless, and software/firmware, and so was born the new company with a mission 'to take on the industry giants by striving to produce products that embody the sound

and engineering excellence one would expect from a company with our history.' Move forward seven years, and Austrian Audio now has a range covering headphones for both the professional and domestic audio sectors, plus an acclaimed line-up of microphones for studio and stage. And the latest addition to the

**The comfort of their fit and their expressive sound makes it almost possible to forget that you're not hearing a pair of fine speakers**

catalogue is the pair of headphones we have here, the flagship The Composer model, selling for £2249.

Given the model's name, it's hardly surprising that classical music enthusiasts are a prime target here, and this is reinforced by the availability of a partnering headphone amplifier from

Austrian Audio, the £1299 Full Score one. The amplifier is an all-analogue device – some headphone amplifiers also have digital-to-analogue conversion built-in – and is said to be 'designed for dedicated audiophiles, engineers and musicians seeking unparalleled sonic experiences.'

The amplifier design uses fully discrete components throughout, rather than the chip-amps found in some designs, and is built for very low distortion, whatever the headphone load it's driving. It has both balanced and unbalanced inputs, with outputs on two 6.3mm headphone sockets and – behind a sliding panel – a 4-pin XLR balanced connection, while a button selects a proprietary 'True Transient Technology' function, designed to deliver the full bandwidth and finest details of a recording.

The claim is that this 'helps deliver the most jaw-dropping transients, such as the snap of a kickdrum or the delicate pluck of a guitar string in unaltered detail', but the manufacturer suggests this may be a bit much for some recordings mastered for

### SUGGESTED PARTNERS

The Austrian Audio pairing is a complete 'just add source' system – here's how to make the most of the two

### EVERSOLO DMP-A6

Create a complete streaming headphone system with the addition of the excellent EverSolo DMP-A6 network player



### A&FUTURA SE300

Treat The Composer to top-quality music on the move with Astell & Kern's A&futura SE300 portable audio player



listening on 'slower' systems, which is why the function is switchable.

The volume control is designed with a special curve to give more adjustability in its lower reaches, this means the Full Score one doesn't need a separate gain switch, as found on many headphone amps. This volume profile is useful with headphones such as The Composer, the high sensitivity of which means it's far from power-hungry, while still enabling the new amplifier to drive properly more demanding headphone designs.

The headphones themselves use a new version of Austrian Audio's high-excursion technology, the Hi-X49 DLC drive units using a 49mm diaphragm coated in a diamond-like carbon material for stiffness without added weight, and being mounted in an open-backed housing for clarity and airiness. A neat touch is that the ear-cups have a four-position tilt mechanism to create the best fit to the user's head, and the headband has a mesh material to contact the head, avoiding heat build-up during protracted listening sessions.

Although light – around 385g without the detachable cables fitted – The Composer feels rugged and durable and, with an eye to the company's professional business, it's all completely serviceable should problems occur. The earpads use a magnet attachment, allowing them

to be replaced easily, and the cables provided plug straight into each side of the headphones using an unusual double-banana-plug system. Both balanced and unbalanced cables are provided in 3m lengths, the 'conventional' one having a 3.5mm plug and a 6.3mm adapter, while the balanced cable uses a four-pin XLR plug. In addition, there's a 1.4m balanced cable terminated with a 4.4mm Pentaconn plug suitable for a range of high-end portable music players.

Completing the package is a sturdy wooden storage box, but it's unlikely this will see much use, so addictive is the sound of this headphone/amplifier combination.

### PERFORMANCE

Austrian Audio may talk about the benefits of this pairing in terms of plucked guitar-strings and kick-drums, but its appeal is much wider than that. Playing the charming Ensemble Altera 'The Lamb's Journey' album, what immediately impresses is not just the sheer levels of detail available here – right from the opening performance of Joanna Marsh's *Worthy is the Lamb* all the way through to the vocal Agnus Dei version of the Barber *Adagio* – but also the way this combination brings together focus and a wonderful sense of space and air. And it's not long before the ability to resolve the finest detail, and

delineate the way a note is played becomes quite addictive – as, for example, with the opening of Ligeti's Violin Concerto from the recent Ensemble InterContemporain overview of the composer on Alpha, which is as enveloping as it is thrilling with this amplifier and headphones.

Indeed, the magic of these headphones is that the combination of the comfort of their fit and their expressive sound makes it almost possible to forget that you're not hearing a pair of fine speakers with music, but instead enjoying a more intimate personal listening experience. That's as true with the gorgeous two-piano performances of Alexander Kobrin and Frédéric D'Orion-Nicolas on their 'Rachmaninov Heritage' set as it is with the deep, sonorous bass of composer Anna Meredith's *Nautilus*, from her 'Varmints' album, or the majestic final movement of Beethoven's Ninth played by the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra on DG, this last showing the ability of the fast, precise Austrian Audio pairing to deliver scale without losing the sense of concert-hall ambience and presence.

I've always had an on-off relationship with headphones, enjoying some while finding others a poor substitute for speakers, but The Composer and its partnering Full Score one amplifier display no such compromises, and require no allowances to be made. **G**

### Or you could try ...

**The seemingly unstoppable growth in 'head-fi' means there's no shortage of top-end headphones available, and a good choice of amplifiers designed to drive them.**

#### Focal Clear MG headphones

For example, French company Focal has the excellent Clear MG headphones, an open-backed design using magnesium-based drivers for a fast, dynamic, and involving sound, and with a luxurious 'chestnut' finish. Find out more at **focal.com**

#### Naim Uniti Atom HE

Perfect to drive the Focals – and many



more high-end headphones – is the Naim Uniti Atom HE, a version of the British company's network audio player designed as a dedicated headphone amplifier. It uses

the same network platform as other Naim players and systems, can be controlled with the slick Focal & Naim app, and delivers a sound with real power and finesse. Details at **naimaudio.com**

#### Violectric DHA-V226

Use The Composer with your computer for a minimalist streaming music system using the DHA-V226 from German company Violectric, which combines a high-quality digital-to-analogue converter with a powerful headphone amplifier. Computer input is on a USB-C port, and it offers both balanced and unbalanced headphone outputs. More information at **violectric.de**