

BBC

PRELUDES FOR A PRESIDENT

Why the stars have lined up to play at US inaugurations

WHAT MADE MOZART TICK?

The febrile and sometimes filthy mind of a creative genius

music

The world's best-selling classical music magazine

BBC RADIO 3
Full January listings inside
See p100

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

ANGEL BLUE

Pageants, Proms & Puccini:
the dazzling rise of a great
American soprano

Patricia Routledge

The forgotten musical
past of a television
comedy legend

The pain of love

Schubert's *Die schöne
Müllerin*: the ultimate
tale of rejection

Elisabetta de Gambarini

Meet the Georgian era piano pioneer

Anthony McGill

The clarinettist fighting for equality

The wonder of whales

Nature's long-distance choral singers

Also in this issue...

How Stalin's opera walk-out
left Shostakovich terrified

The composers who thumbed
their noses at authority

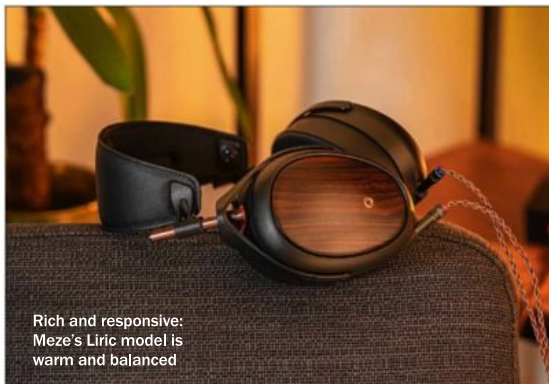
Why do top boffins love the
sound of classical music?



Audio choice

Our audio expert *Chris Haslam* tests options for luxurious listening in private

THIS MONTH: HIGH-END HEADPHONES



Rich and responsive:
Meze's Liric model is
warm and balanced

INDULGENT AUDIO

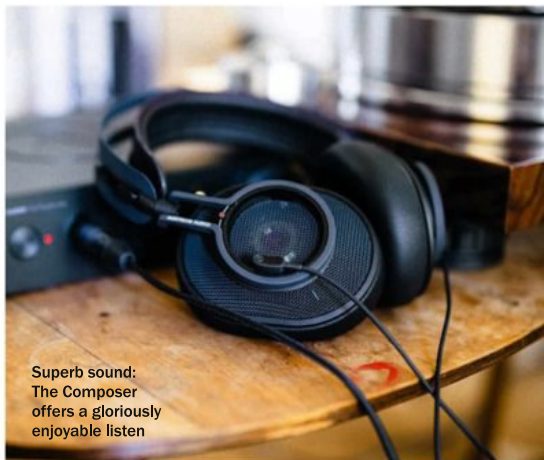
Meze Audio Liric 2nd Generation £1,850

These beautiful headphones feature advanced hand-assembled planar magnetic drivers that offer a faster, more uniform response than traditional dynamic drivers. The Quarter Wavelength Resonator Mask offers a rich bass response and impressive sense of space, with instrumentation of the orchestra brilliantly realised in almost 3D. They're warm and balanced, but there is also plenty of attack when needed. Sonically I can't fault them, though they fit better when you're relaxing rather than working – the hinges pivot if you look down at a laptop, for instance. mezeaudio.eu

IMPRESSIVE WIRELESS OPTION

Dali IO-8 £599

Like many high-end speaker brands, Dali has branched into the lucrative headphone market, and despite being restricted by Bluetooth, the audio quality of the IO-8 is almost on a par with a wired pair. They have generous 50mm full-range dynamic drivers with 10Hz–43kHz frequency response and a big 30hr battery life – and that's with active noise cancellation turned on. If you're at home or have a DAC or headphone amp, you can plug in to get the very best from these headphones, but in truth, wirelessly (Bluetooth 5.2, aptX HD) they effortlessly open up the orchestra in front of you, pulling out detail in an entertaining way. dali-speakers.com



Superb sound:
The Composer
offers a gloriously
enjoyable listen

SENSATIONAL QUALITY

Austrian Audio The Composer £2,249

Following in the footsteps of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Mahler, these aptly named headphones are engineered and made in Vienna, Austria. They won 'Best High-End Headphones' at the 2024 EISA (Expert Imaging and Sound Association) Awards, and since receiving my review sample I've barely taken them off.

Tested here using Qobuz (qobuz.com) hi-resolution recordings and Austrian Audio's The Full Score (£1,299) headphone amplifier, I find these open-backed headphones to be a gloriously enjoyable listen. They leak sound, so are definitely for at-home solo listening (the best kind), but this restriction gives you the chance to indulge in your favourite concertos – and with the depth of detail, rhythm and drive like you've never experienced before. For a relatively new brand, they've created a premium audiophile product that happily competes with, and challenges, the established brands in the industry. And they're even verging on being 'good value' compared to many of those headphones that also manage to sound this fine.

Unlike the majority of big stay-at-home headphones, The Composer weighs just 385g (without cables) and never once felt hefty. The build is predominantly metal, which helps strip out excess, and the earpads apply hardly any pressure to the side of the head. My only criticism is the lack of adjustability. They fit me well on the smallest setting (and I have a big head) but they absolutely swamp my wife, so try before you buy. austrian.audio



NEED TO KNOW

Open or closed back? 'Open-back' headphones allow the music to breathe, providing a spacious sound, ideal for expansive soundscapes. 'Closed-back' models offer a focused sound with enhanced bass and less sound leakage.

Source material The more advanced the

headphones, the more detail they can reveal. This is where hi-resolution (CD-quality or higher) makes a significant difference. Tidal.com and Qobuz.com have a wide range of hi-res tracks.

Do I need a headphone amp? A standalone headphone amp or DAC can get the best from your headphones, especially for those with

high impedance (25 ohms and beyond). Chord (chordelectronics.co.uk), Audiolab (audiolab.co.uk) and iFi (ifi-audio.com) offer a good range. **Which cables?** Premium wired headphones come with cables and connectors to pair with amps/DACs. Choose a 1.2m cable for portability and a 2m plus cable for relaxed home listening.