

Review of Grado PS-1000 Headphones/Mapletree Audio Design Ear+ HD Headphone Amplifier

(Head-Fi Forum Feb., 2011)

Over a decade ago I wanted to get a system setup in my listening room to enjoy music. I've been lucky to work for a respected audio distributor that allowed me to interact with some excellent engineers and solid product range. The system that I had setup provided me with a lot of satisfaction but since 5 years ago I moved and unfortunately found that the listening area wasn't ideal. I found it painful to try and setup the system to its optimal position and unfortunately I wasn't successful without the speakers getting in the way. The enjoyment of just listening to music was affected because of the less than standard speaker placement and ended up critiquing the sound rather than simply enjoy the music. Sharing the space with my wife complicated things ;)



Life for the last few years got really busy and had no time to sit and enjoy music and I started to miss that. One day I started listening to my music from my 10 year old Grado SR-60's hooked up to my Iphone and I realized what I've been missing. There is no doubt that the Grado SR-60's are one if not the best headphones for the price. These headphones had a lot of use especially at the gym regardless how dorky I might have looked. It was time to get a new pair for serious listening at home. I wanted a pair of headphones to be efficient enough to be driven even by an Iphone. Although most if not all Grado headphones are rated at 32 Ohms, they are very efficient. I wanted to get a pair that had excellent soundstage, clarity but most importantly a joy to listen to for many years to come... Lo and behold! The PS-1000 Grado headphones!

Before anyone listens to these headphones seriously, they need to be broken-in for at least 100 hours. John Grado states that they need to be broken-in with normal use and not with continuous 24/h a day signal. This forced me to become more patient but made it an enjoyable one nevertheless. The difference was noticeable as the drivers started to loosen up. Bass became more defined and the sound started to really open up. As I am no real expert I will do my best to describe the sound. I've listened to Sennheiser's for a short time but my comparison is to SR-60's as I'm only very familiar with them and I'm in no position to compare to other headphones. This post is more for anyone who is interested with my experience was and perhaps help anyone make a decision.

Clarity

Probably one of the strongest points for these headphones. The level of clarity compared to SR-60's as expected is huge. My music selection is very diverse, from electronic based such as Delerium, Massive Attack to Pink Floyd, etc. With the PS1000's I naturally fell in love with acoustic based music. The amount of detail from each instrument transported me into the musicians' room.

Soundstage/depth

The soundstage from these headphones is impressive. Music extended all around me. I am sure that other manufacturers in this price range have also nailed it. It's impressive that this level of soundstage was only accomplished by speakers years back. Compared to the SR-60's music is no longer in your head but all around you.

Bass

I'm having a little difficulty to rate the bass coming from these headphones. The bass no doubt goes deep and is well controlled. However at times I do feel that the bass is a little on the lean side when listening to some songs. If anyone is looking for headphones that will make your brain shake from the level of bass, these headphones may not be your choice.

Source (iPhone)

As mentioned earlier, listening through an iPhone, the tonal balance is surprisingly natural. However as expected listening straight from the headphone jack does not bring the last detail from the music. Instruments bland a little but nevertheless that didn't stop me from enjoying the music. Compared to the SR-60's the sound difference is still big with an iPhone. Sound level from both headphones when used with an iPhone is sufficient!

Source: Centrance DACport

I bought the DACport when I am travelling or when I want to take my laptop with me to bed and listen to some music before going to sleep. The sound is smooth, detailed and plays loud. Preferred volume setting is a little over half way. It's an impressive little DAC/headphone amp especially when you are on the go.

Source (Asus Xonar ST, Headphone Out) + AD8620BR + LME49720 Op-Amps

My main source is from the PC via Asus Xonar ST soundcard that was favourably reviewed by Stereophile as a good step forward to high-end audio. I had replaced the op-amps with positive results when listening from my SR-60's. The AD8620BR op-amps are known for excellent detail and soundstage with a more forward high frequency sound which mated well with the SR-60's. However when listening to the PS-1000's with these op-amps, made the sound somewhat harsh with a few recordings and I preferred the sound from the Centrance DACport instead.

Source (Asus Xonar ST, Line Out with Mapletree Audio Design EAR+HD headphone amp)



EAR+HD Mapletree Headphone amp

Purchasing this amp was one of the best purchases I've made for a long time and made me fall in love with tube sound.

As mentioned listening straight from the headphone out from the Asus Xonar ST soundcard with the PS1000 sounded a little too forward for my liking. Dr. Lloyd Peppard has truly designed an excellent headphone amp that makes a match made in heaven with my Grado's. The sound is detailed but very smooth and natural. This is when my vocabulary comes short. Soundstage is deeper than what I've heard before with no harshness found from previous setup. The sound comes alive with better impact. I'm planning to do anything possible to keep this amp going for 20+ years I'm that impressed with the sound quality from this amp.

Overall impressions (Grado PS-1000 + Mapletree Audio EAR+HD)

Grado PS-1000 headphones with the Mapletree Audio EAR+ HD headphone amp helped me fall in love with music again. I was surprised to see the difference in sound from all the sources I previously mentioned. Some very favourable and some not so much. It just shows how important it is to have a properly matched source with these headphones. This setup is the best I've heard and matches if not surpasses a high-end rig that costs 10x the cost of this setup without worrying about speaker placement and room acoustics. I am once again able to enjoy music and get excited with new material!

What's in the future? I want to get a dedicated DAC connected to my computer. The DAC that has grabbed my attention is the Ayre QB-9 but I'm more than happy with the current setup to enjoy my music and allow me to save.

Hope this post was useful to some of you searching for one of the best headphones and headphone amp

Happy listening!

-Tom- (Head-Fi member devotionaltom)

