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Audio Traveler

Category Archives: Athens Headphone Festival 2014



ATHENS HEADPHONE FESTIVAL 2014

Athens Headphone Festival, Part 3

OCTOBER 9, 2014 | PANAGIOTIS KARAVITIS | AKG, AUDEZE, GRACE DESIGN, GREEK,
HIFIMAN, JECKLIN, KINGSOUND, M2TECH, MO-FI BLUE, SONY, VIVA | 1 COMMENT



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Sony had a big humongous presence during the fest with many new models of the Hi Res series which made their debut only a few weeks back at IFA Berlin 2014 and the one that caught my attention was the MDR-1ADAC



(<http://www.sony.co.uk/electronics/headband-headphones/mdr-1adac>) closed back headphone with incorporated quad DSD-DXD capable DAC. Yep, you got it right, this pair of cans features a DSD converter, all you have to add is a source for your files. Besides the obvious Sony range of products (phones, Walkman etc.) it can be driven by PC, Mac or iPhones. In other words: everything. Driven is not the right term though, it also packs a digital amplifier (though it can be used in passive mode). Charging is easy through the USB port and the battery should be good for some 7.5 hours according to Sony. Interesting specs do not end here, the driver is 40mm diameter while frequency response is 4–40,000Hz for the analog domain and 4–100,000Hz for the digital. When I finished reading the data sheet I expected the MDR-1DAC to weight half a ton, it tips the scale at only 300gr! Built quality is excellent; the sensation was of a headphone of at least double the price. Yes, the price, in EU the MSRP is 300 euros; expect it to cost something like that in the US as well.



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A powered headphone, that's interesting. Wait, there was another one. Only this time it came from the States and historic microphone manufacturer Blue (<http://mofiheadphones.com/>). Goes by the name "Mo-Fi" (no connection whatsoever with the record label) and looks like a headphone that came out of the film "Transformers". The ingenious multi-joined design of the headband skeleton allows the headphone to occupy as little space as possible when parked and be very comfy when used, even after many hours. The tension created by this skeleton can be trimmed to everyone's preferences through a knob in the top and other aspects like height can be adjusted too. As for the 240mW amp section, it can work in standard or extra bass mode, or it can be turned completely off. The MoFi is also intelligent; it will shut itself down saving precious battery once you take it off. So what about the sound of this electro-mechanical marvel? I gave it more than just a quick listen in all possible combinations. What I wanted to test was the inner amp because the overall weight of the thing is under 470gr and I wanted to see if it is any good or one would end up using an external amp every time possible. Enter Grace Design (<http://www.gracedesign.com>) m920 High Resolution Monitoring System. Besides using the latest 32Bit Sabre DAC technology thus delivering up to 384kHz PCM and 2x-4x DSD playback, it also packs a sophisticated amp design based on the Ohman circuit. Tracks included "There Is No Greater Love" by Miles Davis, Anna Netrebko singing "Qaundo Avran Fine Ormai" from Idomeneo and a piece by Jane Monheit which I failed to take note.. First of all the MoFi in its passive function is a good headphone. I would call it "flat", not the way an HD-800 is but definitely not colored. Frequency extension is good and bass is well-balanced, not too much, not to shy. The 50mm fiber reinforced driver seems more than adequate. Switching the amplifier "On" the sensation was that while not being on par with Grace's amazing circuitry the gap was relative and I could live without a dedicated amp solution. The "On+" position with extra bass topping was not of my taste but it might intrigue many others, depending mostly on the music genre. This headphone will surely find its place in the market, with pros working out in the field or with headfiers who want to pack everything for portability without sacrificing deep bass and musical pleasure. I left the price for last; it went on sale for \$350. Color me impressed!



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Now the time has come to speak of the big toys. For those who are not familiar with KingSound (<http://kingsaudio.com.hk>) let me do a quick introduction. Made in Honk Kong, electrostatic headphones with solid state or tube energizers and relatively affordable prices (when compared to Stax or the mythical Sennheiser Orpheus). Having both in hand I opted for the cheaper one, kidding, I opted straight up for the latest and more expensive KS-H03 with matching tube amplifier M-20. Yes because judging by my not so distant experience with the Orpheus system and the Stax range one must take advantage of tube amplification for the electrostats. In theory this is where the line ends. In practice? One could easily end this report here. The big KS combo fed by Auralic's Vega DAC was breathtaking. Airy, transparent, you name it, it was all there. Listening fatigue is an unknown phrase for this system. Priced at a very reasonable \$2,500 this could have been best sound of the show if it wasn't for what is coming next, though I spoke with friends who declared it personal best and in all honesty I cannot blame them.



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The single most impressive headphone of the show was the AKG K812 (<http://www.akg.com/k812-1308.html>). Introduced earlier this year, I never had the chance to listen to it. Some rave reviews were speaking about the best dynamic headphone in production. Local importer paired it with an older version of Apogee's Ensemble, a pro audio interface for Mac only. Not my ideal way of starting a listening session, I would have preferred a well-established dedicated headphone amplifier. Anyway, I took in hands the open back K812 and noticed the huge depth they have, the distance between the outer part of the leather pads and the drivers themselves is quite something, I would say almost a couple of inches. This allows for the auricle to actively participate in the propagation of the sounds towards the auditory canal and finally the tympanic membrane. Next thing one easily notices is the wide membrane, 53mm is no joke. Then the good AKG people told me that the magnets in the K812 have a field of 1.5 Tesla. This is a lot. More than a lot, this is enough to remove your dental amalgam sealings.. As for the million dollar question, how do they sound, I found them exquisite. Wide soundstage like few others, micro and microdynamics were excellent and timbre was faithful to the original instruments. I have read that these might end up being harsh on certain recordings and I tend to believe it, but then again all "reference" pieces of gear will show off the limits in the reproduction chain, whether those are in the recording or the other links of the chain. After the show I had this repeating thought in mind, I have to listen to these again, only this time with a proper amplifier and DAC.



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And this brings us to the best sound of the show. The Viva Audio (<http://vivahifi.com>) Egoista single ended 845 triode amplifier paired with matching Viva Numerico CD player/DAC and Audeze (<http://audeze.com>)'s LCD-3 planar magnetic headphones, spiced with cables by Jorma Design. Audeze had a huge presence during the show with all models on display, from the popular LCD-2 up to the X, XC and 3, each of these attached to a different set up. The closed back XC was playing with iFi Audio (<http://ifi-audio.com>)'s new micro iDSD DAC while the X was connected to the terrific M2Tech (<http://m2tech.biz>) Young-Marley set. But nothing in the room could match the Egoista. I was among the fortunate to listen to the preproduction model that was presented in Munich High End in May and I still remember by jaw dropping to ground like an anvil. Despite having the same Porsche yellow color the unit that made it here in Athens is not the same, it is one of the very first production models. Very few things have changes and the sound is sublime. This amp outputs 15Watts which is more than enough to drive everything including a pair of HiFiMan's (<http://hifiman.com>) HE-6 that a friend brought with him. Drive them or should I say dominate them. Never seen an amp clearly take control like this of these legendary insensitive headphones. Sound was fleshy, lots of impact and drama in the presentation. With the LCD-3s it was even better. In the classic audiophile CD "Stockfish vol.1" bass extension was endless, transparency and delicacy combined with the fastest transient response, effortless and explosive at the same time. Voices had the fluidity only single ended triodes manage to create. And there was no sign of noise. Nothing. Zero. This might be easy for solid state designs but single ended direct heated triodes are truly hard to nail. Chapeau to Mr. Amedeo Schembri for his creation.



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The last pic from the show is a request that arrived directly from Audio Traveler's editor Scot Hull, that is me with the legendary Jecklin Float electrostatic headphones also known as Magneto's Helmet. Enjoy! *[Editors note: I did — check it out, way above! Hee hee!]*



ATHENS HEADPHONE FESTIVAL 2014

Athens Headphone Festival, Part 2

OCTOBER 8, 2014 | PANAGIOTIS KARAVITIS | FINAL AUDIO DESIGN, GREEK, LAB12,
NORMA, PATHOS, QUAD, SHURE



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I left Italy a few years back but my audiophile heart stayed there, with brands like Pathos



(<http://www.pathosacoustics.com/indexeng.htm>) who blend the Italian style with excellent build quality and sensual sound. On display the Aurium headphone amplifier with 3.6 watts/32 Ohm in class A driving the Final Audio Design (<http://final-audio-design.com/en/>) Pandora Hope IV headphones, a hybrid design that incorporates a 50mm dynamic driver with a balanced armature one. Source was also from Pathos, the Digit hybrid CD player capable of 24/192. While listening to Gwyneth Herbert's "My Narrow Man" I realized that this could be the perfect system for someone who seeks mild-warm sound for long sessions but not so for the younger ones who go after dynamism and ultimate resolution. My impression is that this character has more to do with the Final headphones rather than the Pathos electronics.



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Final Audio Design (<http://final-audio-design.com/en/>) had many, many products on display and I realized how vast their proposition is. This Japanese brand offers everything from entry-level balanced armature earphones to ultra high-end dynamic ones costing more than \$3,000 and this makes them the most expensive earphones of the show and probably on the market today. Actually the Piano Forte X gold are not typical earphones. They sport a 16mm dynamic driver housed in an all metal, gold-plated copper housing that has the geometry of a horn with vented back. I am not familiar with any other brand producing horn loaded earphones. The cables are wrapped in cloth, the carrying case is made out of metal (brass?) and the price is astronomical. Have I mentioned the price? Yes, it is unbelievable; just consider that they cost more than the best Audeze, Sennheiser, AKG, Beyer headphones on the market. Such an expensive earphone makes sense if driven by just as expensive portable audio players and I had the Astell&Kern (<http://astellnkern.com>) AK240 standing next to it, so a listen was obligatory. The sound was clear, with huge extension in the upper highs but not so in the very first octave. I think this has something to do with the Piano Forte X's tip which is metallic and has no silicone or foam to perfectly adhere to the ear. Mids were tremendous, with a natural sense of flow and transparency. The AK240 was driving these with ease; there should be no problem with lower power output devices too. Stevie Ray Vaughn's guitar recreated by this combo had the typical "reverb" sound in the classic "Tin Pan Alley" and I could hear his breath while singing as if he was a few steps away. Drums sticks were also crisp and decisive in their presentation. Impressive? Yes. Law of diminishing return? Probably yes. Do I want them? You bet!



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Moving to a more traditional device, Shure (<http://www.shure.com/>) introduced the SE846 isolating earphones. At \$999 these do not come cheap but the again that is pretty much the market price of earphones with quadruple armatures. Yep, you got it right, 4 armatures that accordingly to Shure blend together seamlessly. The “woofer” armature has a unique patent pending technology that aims in recreating a “sub-woofer” experience through the use of a low pass filter. By creating a metal pathway 4 inches long these earphones manage to push the low frequency roll off naturally under 75Hz. And similarly to the RHA T10i covered in the first part of this show report (<http://theaudiotraveler.com/2014/10/08/athens-headphone-festival-part-1/>), the SE846 also have customizable frequency response by taking advantage of changeable nozzles. Similarly to the T10i, the flavors are also 3, Shure names them “balanced”, “warm”, and “bright”. The package is completed with two pairs of detachable cables (46” and 64” long) and a nice selection of tips. Sound isolation is specified at -37dB but I could not testify it because I used expendable single use tips for my listening session of “Hotel California” by the Eagles. What I can testify is the widely extended frequency response paired to the sensation of a single driver experience. All four armatures sung in unison, easily the most coherent presentation of all the earphones present during the show.



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Norma of Italy (<http://www.normaudio.com/>) recently introduced an all new design, the HS DA1 modular DAC. This Dac can be purchased with 2 analog inputs and a volume control option thus turning it into a pre-amp. It features 5 digital inputs (sample rates up to 24/192) and can drive up to two headphones at the same time. Both cans connected were Grados, the SR60 and the RS2, I used the later for a quick glance at this rather pricey set up (The HS DA1 combined with the Norma Revo CD player go north of \$9.000). In Tony Joe White's "I Believe I've Lost My Way" the good old Grados amazed me with their faithful timbre in the electro-acoustic guitar and they did just the same in the famous flamenco by Armik "Gypsy Flame". Grado still offers some of the most naturally sounding headphones and Norma seems to have hit a homerun with this DAC-head amp.



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Close to the Norma set up there was the only local presence, Lab12 (<http://www.lab12.gr>) with their headphone amplifier, the “hpa”. This is an OTL tube headphone amplifier (based on the 6N1P Russian double triodes) with incorporated DAC and preamplifier output. Power is 1Watt/32 Ohms, enough to drive all but the most insensible headphones (call me HE-6). The HPA has already been presented in the Munich High End show but during that I did not have the time to get a listen. Here in Athens it drove Sennheiser’s HD 700 while instead of the internal converter Lab12’s dedicated DAC1 was used. The HD700 is notorious for its treble irregularities but during my quick session (Bill Withers singing “Ain’t No Sunshine and JM Jarre’s “Oxygen 2”) this characteristic did not emerge, confirming the expected warm sound of the tubes. Punch was all there and no signs of roll off made their presence. This is a classic advantage of OTL designs lacking the output transformers. The HPA sells in Europe for 990 euros.



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Staying in tube territory, Quad (<http://www.quad-hifi.co.uk>) reserved us with a surprise, their first ever headphone amplifier. The PA One (currently no info on Quad's internet page) is more than just a head-amp. In typical 2014 fashion it also has a DAC capable of 24/192 (with USB, optical and coaxial) and will double as a pre-amp with an analog potentiometer and two inputs (line + balanced). Tubes are 2 x 6SL7, 2 x 6SN7 while rectification is made by a single EZ81 valve. The looks are those of the classic Quad style, with a grill above the tubes for heat dissipation and transformers packed under a metal casing. The user can choose among high and low impedance headphones through a switch in the front plate (with "low" ranging from 32-100 and "high" from 100-300 Ohms). Overall construction is robust and despite this being the first piece to make it out of the factory I could not find any blemishes, it seems as if it is ready for full-scale production. I gave it a listen with Sennheiser's HD 600 and with the HiFiman HE-6. The second was more of a test as the PA one seemed to have more than enough juice for the 600s (power output was indicated at 500Watts, which is impossible, so let's call it "unknown" for the moment). A test that the PA one did not pass, the HE-6 as expected required more watts in order to be properly driven. The sensation was that it would have been enough for other planar magnetic headphones (Fostex, Audeze etc). With the Senns the new Quad made a terrific match, soundstage was very wide and deep, sound was "fleshy" while being detailed at the same time (that was on Andrew Lloyd Webber's personal favorite "The Phantom of the Opera"). Speaking with other visitors I received the same positive feedback, everyone thought marvels for the PA one. Price in Europe should be in the neighborhood of 1.800 euros, approx. \$2.250.



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ATHENS HEADPHONE FESTIVAL 2014

Athens Headphone Festival, Part 1

OCTOBER 8, 2014 | PANAGIOTIS KARAVITIS | AEDLE, AUDIO TECHNICA, FOCAL, GREEK, MERIDIAN, NAIM, RHA, VMODA | 2 COMMENTS



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The first Greek headphone fest has closed its doors only a few hours ago and the dust has not yet settled. Some 500+ visitors had the chance to see, touch and listen more than 40 complete set ups from some 80 different brands and the 9 official hours of the show seemed too few to let



everyone grasp a small sample of what each combo offers in terms of built quality, convenience and most important, the sound. Considering that in each table more than one combination of headphones and electronics were available, it was absolutely impossible to listen to every single piece of equipment. Sony alone had dozens of models, AKG and Shure the same and many of the exhibitors allowed visitors to swap gear so one had to carefully choose what to go for. So did I, pointing mostly for interesting combos and novelties.

RHA (<http://www.rha-audio.com/us/>) has been producing some very interesting earphones with exceptional built quality for the money. All RHA models were on display but the one that clearly stands out is the new T10i which pushes the company's technological knowhow into cutting edge territories. Patent pending over-ear hooks designed to hold the headphones in position with the cable running over and behind the ear, injection molded stainless steel body and a newly designed driver with interchangeable tuning filters. These filters come in three flavors: "treble", "reference" and "bass". As the T10i is designed to perform with the Cupertino's "i" family of products I gave them a listen with an iPhone 5 which was more than enough to drive them. On Black Cofee's remix of Gnarles Barkley's "Crazy" the different filters provided palpable variations in the tonal character of the T10i. I would go for the "reference" one, I hardly consider myself a "bass lover" but you might enjoy more one of the other two filters. RHA offers this amazing piece of gear with a leather case stacked with all possible ear tips including dual density silicone, double flange silicone and memory foam ones.



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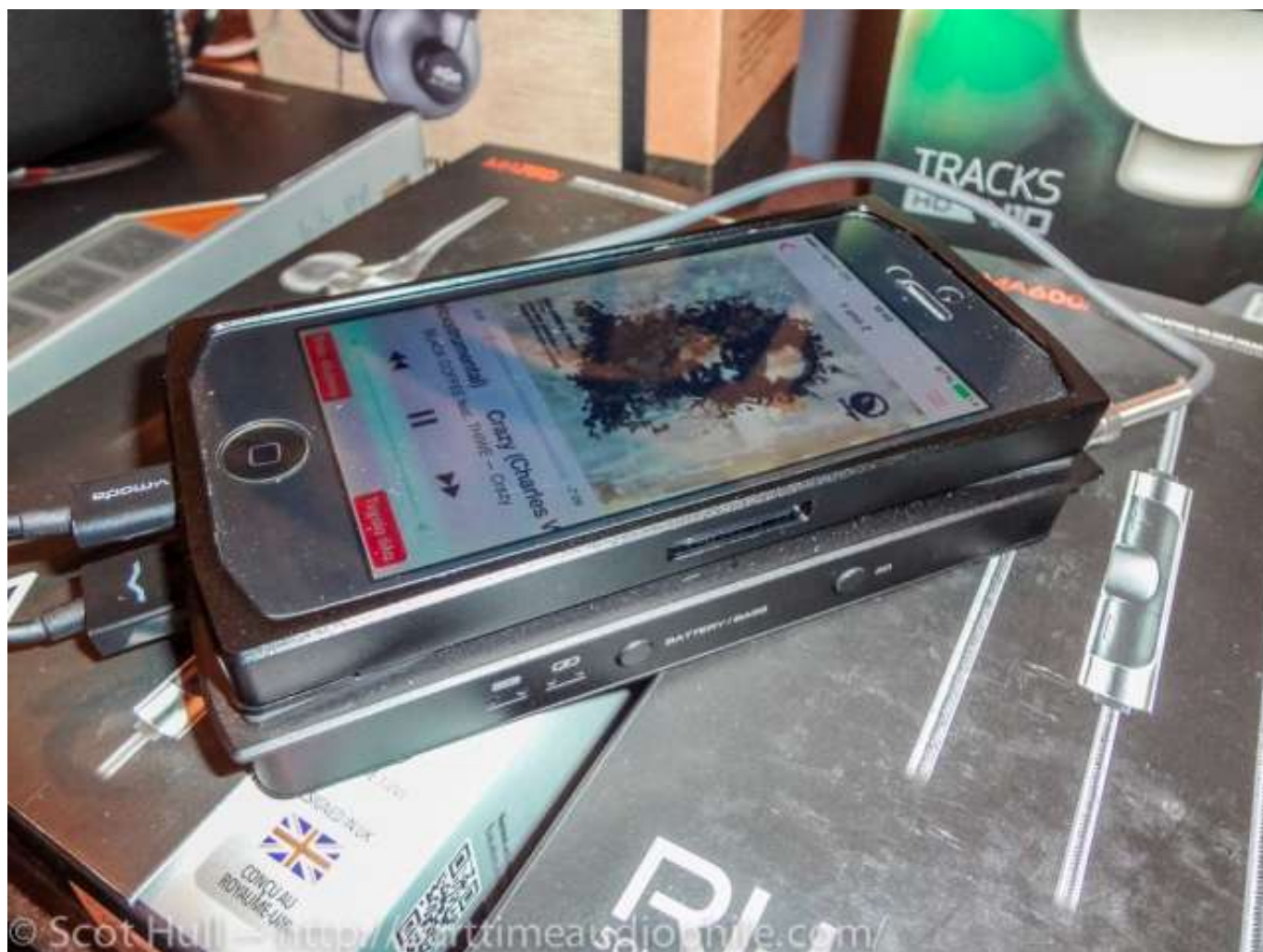
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For those seeking more power from their cell phones in order to drive lower sensitivity cans or simply obtain lower distortion at higher volumes, the V-amp Verza from V-Moda (<http://v-moda.com/>) can make the difference. This is a slick-looking little amp, about the size of an iPhone 5S with which makes perfect partnership by gliding into the specific case that V-Moda provides. (a special case for Samsung's Galaxy SIII also exists and I'm pretty sure one for the new iPhone 6 will follow). The Verza VAMP will provide 150mW x 2 (@32 ohm) in USB mode (Android) and 130mW x 2 (@32 ohm) in iOS mode meaning will pump your portable experience and will double as battery extender for your phone in case of emergency with the 2200mAh internal pack.



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Using the same iPhone-Vamp Verza combination I gave a quick listen at V-Moda's award winning Crossfade M 100 headphones. These are especially designed for DJ use and by judging the amount of pro DJs hitting the V-Moda stand I think this is not just another award. The 100s offer excellent isolation both from the outside noise and with minimum sound leakage from the cans themselves, a widely spread soundstage, pro features like clickfolding during transport or a microphone addition and an overall rugged construction that will withstand the dancing club use. Sound-wise these are very interesting pieces of gear, with fast and clean bass while mids are also well-balanced. If one adds the possibility of laser engraving the lateral metal plates I could see this becoming a terrific alternative to some well-known colorful cans recently bought by Apple.



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Moving to a pair of classic brands, Audio Technica (<http://www.audio-technica.com/>) joined forces with Meridian (<https://www.meridian-audio.com/>) and several combinations were on display. The bigger Meridian Prime headphone amplifier with its many outputs was driving several cans contemporary but my heart led me to the small Explorer, a device that blends portability and sound quality like few others. I have had the privilege of using the Explorer in the past but mostly with in ear monitors, this time I gave it a run with the Audio Technica AX1iS which are amazingly good over ear headphones especially considering the \$39.95 price. Comfortable and light enough to be used for hours, a perfect every day companion. Having in front of me the big ATH A-900X I made the swap and my admiration for the small Explorer only grew bigger as I noticed how well it drove the 53mm drivers. One thing I cherish in headphones is comfort and the AT self-adjusting wing support mechanism provides one of the comfiest ways for long-term listening sessions. One thing I must report is the imaging, for being a closed back design it felt better than large part of the competition in this price range. MSRP is \$300 but you can easily find these highly discounted.



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Moving into the big hall I bumped into the Aedle (<http://www.aedle.net>) headphones. First a confession: I enjoy fashion but not when it comes to music and sound. I prefer an ugly as hell pair of headphones that performs exceptionally well than one which looks like as if it came out of Milan's fashion week and then ends up sounding like crap. Especially when the price is astronomical. The Aedle VK-1 classic fits my imaginative bill of fashion equals expensive equals awful sound, or at least that is what I thought when I saw the elegant carton box with aluminum plate and perfectly executed leather trimming. First thing I did was to check the price. What? Only \$500.. Not that expensive after all, considering that these are hand-made in France. I found the courage to give them a listen, attached to an iPod classic and "You're Special" by Soul Creation feat. Stephanie Cooke sounded "eargasmic" (found the term on youtube's comments under the clip..) Not sure what "eargasmic" means but the Aedles are not that bad for being more of a fashion statement than a classic headphone. While being a pair of over the ears headphones with titanium transducers that scream "fashion statement" that do not come close to my personal taste, nor they race for best sound of the show, I would suggest to everyone who knows who Ermenegildo Zegna and Salvatore Ferragamo are to seriously consider these. (Actually Ralph Lauren sells these through his flagship stores).



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Staying in French territory, Focal (<http://focal.com>) recently made their debut in headphone territory with the Spirit series. During the show all three available models were on display so I focused mostly on the “Classic”, designed for the audio enthusiast but also made an interesting A-B comparison with the Pro version. The classic was driven by an all Naim (<http://www.naimaudio.com/>) set up (the two brands are now under the same roof with Focal buying out Naim no more than a couple of years back) which included the headline 2 amplifier, CD 5 XS, Flatcap XS and NAPSC power supply. The Spirit Pro on the other side of the hall was driven by Metric Halo’s LIO-8, a well-known and highly respected ADC-DAC designed for studio applications fed by Amarra on MacBook Pro. Sounds like a clash of two worlds, the classic hi-fi vs the hard-core pro. I will take the classic hi-fi in this case, the richer harmonic content and stylish finish of the “Classic” version sounded more pleasant after a while, with the pro version resulting slightly uninvolved and dry in the long term. I was told that Metric Halo will make a home version of its DAC following the path of Mytek who now steadily produces DA converters for the audiophile masses. As for the Spirit Classic, it departs from the well-known Focal sound of the last years with emphasis being given to the mids and not the higher frequencies, a turn in style which finds me more than happy. On Groove into bits Vol.2 – by Blumenhofer Acoustics the Classic excelled in air instruments and showed some fast transient responses but lacked in ultimate definition, this last feature was more pertinent to the Pro version but it might have had something to do with the rest of the chain too.



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Stay tuned cause there is much more to come!



ATHENS HEADPHONE FESTIVAL 2014

Headphone virus pandemic hitting Greece: The First Greek Headphone Festival

OCTOBER 2, 2014 | PANAGIOTIS KARAVITIS | GREEK HEADPHONE



(https://audiograb.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/brands-poster_gb.jpg)

Speaking with other ~~sick people~~ hi-fi enthusiasts about the global headphone pandemic we both arrived at the same conclusion. This has been the fastest spreading trend in the hi-fi world since....ever.

Only a few years back headphones were used by some, mostly professionals like DJs and radio stations, a few audio aficionados who were doing their listening sessions in the late hours and that was mostly it. Then came the cellphones, the iPod, flocks of gamers and last but not least Dr. Dre with Beats. Nowadays you simply cannot walk in the road without noticing how many wear headphones. From full size cans to multi armature in ear monitors seems that especially the younger cannot leave home without them. Not that the ~~older, more mature~~, no longer in their twenties can do without them. The über high-end headphone market has hit historic heights and some very serious propositions have landed in the last couple of years. I can think of more than one relatively new brand offering amazing planar magnetic headphones; the same goes for some impressive single ended triode headphone amplifiers. All of this is in addition to the historic names like AKG, Beyerdynamic, Grado, etc, flooding the market with an ever-expanding product range.



And like in all pandemics, after hitting the main markets like the US, Japan and northern Europe, this virus started spreading in the periphery; this year, it's Greece's turn.

Local audio and video forum [AVClub.gr](http://avclub.gr/forum/forum.php) (<http://avclub.gr/forum/forum.php>) has set up the event in big style, booking a couple of halls at the Athens Divani Caravel Hotel. More important after a long series of contacts with local importers and distributors a total of 40+ complete

headphone set ups will be waiting the can enthusiasts next Saturday. Goodies on display will include all sorts of headphones from full size beasts to in ear monitors, amps, DACs, music streamers, portable audio players, specialized cables, software demonstrations for PC and Mac and loads of music.

Me? I will be there with my fido usb key, packed with everything from 320mp3 to ultra high res DXD and DSD files and will report for you on the most interesting set ups, the new stuff and best sounding like always. Stay tuned!

