

These affordable headphone amps can give you a fantastic bang for the bucks



TEST WINNER

Creek OBH-21

£150 ★★★★★

FOR

Fast rhythmic delivery; firm bass; composure

AGAINST

Character is a touch lightweight

VERDICT

Excellent composure and finesse for the money, but you might demand more bass

THIS IS THE standard version of the OBH-21SE we awarded five stars in May 2003. The £100 price reduction means one less line input, and you miss out on the higher-grade components and power supply used with the SE. However, this machine maintains the

twin headphone-socket arrangement and, more importantly, the fast and rhythmic style of its big brother.

Classical pieces belt along with drive and conviction: the fresh and detailed presentation shows a quick and assured amp. There's no harshness and you can crank up the volume without fear of it losing control – it's a good choice if you like your tunes loud – but some may wish for a touch more bass weight. The low end delves deep and stays tight, but other boxes will offer a deeper bass sound if not the same overall excellence – that's our only concern and it's not sufficient to rob the Creek of a well-deserved five-stars.

Ergo Amp 1

£169 ★★★★★

FOR

Big, bold delivery; finesse; pace and timing

AGAINST

Forward presentation tiring; bass can be sloppy; strange volume control

VERDICT

Adds deep bass to good pace and creates a thrilling listen, but there's no let up

ERGO'S AMP 1 is free from heat fins and its specification is also pretty minimal. There's just the single headphone socket, one line input, plus a space for Ergo's proprietary AMT system, which apparently when hooked up to Ergo AMT headphones gives

greater detail and dynamics. The staid looks come as no surprise when you learn it's Swiss-built, but any national stereotypes have to be booted firmly out of the window when you hit the power button and give it a listen.

Distributed by Audio Energy, the Amp 1 offers a full-on listening experience and is generous with bass – fun, but not for the faint-hearted. The bold delivery also has finesse and pace, and vocals and classical sound thrilling.

The bass can be a touch overblown and this upfront delivery could be too much for some. Another concern is the lack of travel from the volume control – everything happens in the first quarter – ergo the Ergo drops a star.

Pro-ject Head Box

£150 ★★★★★

FOR

Timing; clear presentation; three line inputs; twin headphone sockets

AGAINST

Treble can be slightly harsh; lacks authority

VERDICT

A champion when it comes to connectivity, but it's out-boxed on purely sonic terms

DON'T TAKE THIS machine's name literally, but do dig out another pair of cans and invite round a friend to enjoy some tunes. The Head Box offers twin headphone sockets, plus its triple line inputs allow you to connect, say, a CD

player, tuner, and a DVD player. This flexibility means little without decent sound, and this unit shows Pro-ject doesn't just excel with its turntables.

Clarity is high up its list of talents and you get good detail from even complex orchestral pieces. Most Pro-ject gear gives good timing and the Head Box also delivers great accuracy. Good dynamics complete a fine listen.

Take care with partnering – upper mid-range and low-end treble can be a touch harsh, and aggressive sources exacerbate the problem. The Head Box is also a little short on outright punch and authority, but it's still a healthy performer well worth its four stars.

Musical Fidelity X-CAN v3

£250 ★★★★★

FOR

Midrange rich and full of detail; sweet treble; weight delivery

AGAINST

Bass detail is not up to mid and treble high standards; complex tunes can fox its timing

VERDICT

A good choice for fans of closely miked vocals, but not quite class-leading overall

THE X-CAN v3 has the lowest spec and the highest price, here, so it had better outperform its rivals to win this test. And there's no lack of space as an excuse for the basic connectivity options – it's by far the largest box here.

So you get just one headphone socket and one line input, but when it comes to sonic performance the Musical Fidelity is multi-talented. It offers sweet treble that works wonderfully well with classical pieces and it continues to excel high up the range. Instruments such as cymbals sound full of detail, but avoid harshness.

These talents reach the midrange, Elvis Costello's *North* set sounding mellifluous and hypnotising. The X-CAN v3 isn't always perfect company: its weighty delivery can be a touch graceless and more complex, bass-heavy tunes can confuse it, which muddies delivery. Definitely worth an audition, but not quite five stars.