



Audeze iSINE 20

Let me confess from the outset that I am not a huge fan of in-ear monitors (IEMs). To me, they feel intrusive and generally uncomfortable, and I don't like the way they have the effect of ear plugs in terms of isolating the wearer from the outside world.

Give me a set of on-ear or even over-ear headphones any day. They might be bigger and heavier, but they're quite easy to get comfortable with. And frankly, the good ones tend to deliver a more believable sonic performance, too.

Audeze produces a range of over-ear headphones that fit that description to a tee: large but comfortable designs with generously proportioned planar magnetic drivers that seem to express the full gamut of sound frequencies with great enthusiasm and no small measure of accuracy.

Then, along came the SINE, the first on-ear planar magnetic headphone from Audeze. Compact and lightweight, it still manages to exude the kind of effortless sonics that have made the larger over-ear Audeze models firm favourites among critical listeners.

And now we have the iSINE, offered in two versions – the iSINE10, and the iSINE20 as tested here. The two look identical except for superficial differences (the 10s have a primarily black finish, the 20s feature brown and gold).

However, what really sets the two models apart are the planar magnetic drivers. Both use relatively large, ultra-thin (by IEM standards) 30 mm diaphragms, in conjunction with high-capacity Fluxor magnets and a proprietary voice coil dubbed Uniforce.

However, the iSINE 20 gets an enhanced version of the 30 mm driver, with a longer voice coil being the biggest single difference. It offers improved control, which translates into faster responses and improved low-frequency performance. However, at 24 ohms, the 20s are also a little more difficult to drive than the 16 ohm iSINE 10.

The IEMs are unusual in that the relatively large diaphragm is housed in a small enclosure that remains outside the ear, while an angled sound tube fits inside the wearer's ear canal.

An extensive array of accessories includes over-ear supports that look the thin ends of



spectacle arms and hook over the ears in a similar fashion. Smaller, softer in-ear stabilisers are provided as an alternative. You also get a choice of soft silicone ear tips.

It all sounds a little awkward, but the arrangement works surprisingly well in practice, although I'd imagine that these are try-before-you-buy devices: not everyone will find them comfortable or achieve a perfect fit – an aspect that's vital if optimum performance is to be achieved.

The i20s come with a choice of two cables: a conventional analogue one with thin, gold-plated prongs for each earpiece on the one end, and a 3,5 mm stereo jack plug on the other. The second is the more interesting one, however, and specifically targets iPhone users.

Termed a Cipher cable, it's Apple MFI-certified and features a Lightning connector instead of the 3,5 mm plug, as well as an in-line DAC/amp with volume controls and a play/pause button. This allows it to access audio from the iDevice in digital form before performing its own D/A conversion. There's also an Audeze app that allows 10-band, DSP-executed equalisation on the fly.

For all its quirkiness, the iSINE 20 is a revelation when it comes to sonic performance. It produces a crystal-clear, wide open soundstage that somehow seems less prone to in-head imaging, and projects a broad, cinemascope-style sound picture.

That this panoramic, almost 3D sonic image is produced by such small in-ear devices comes as a big, grin-inducing surprise. And it doesn't end there. Tonally, the delivery is both generous and linear, with a nicely solid, tautly controlled bottom end, smooth and clean mids, and trebles that dig out every fine sliver of detail.

The latter can seem a little too honest, especially with compromised recordings, or lossy music files. Gently rolling off some of the higher frequencies via the app's equaliser will help, but too much fiddling can also have a net negative effect.



VITAL STATS

Type.....	In-ear
Transducer type	Planar magnetic, semi-open
Magnet array	Neodymium
Diaphragm	30 mm Uniforce
Impedance.....	24 ohms
Frequency response	10 Hz – 50 kHz
SPL	>120 dB maximum
Weight.....	20 grams excluding cable

Price R8 990

Verdict

Uncanny realism and tonal range from tiny diaphragms. Puts most out-of-the-box IEM to shame. Lightning cable for iPhone 7 users.

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OUR RATING: 86 / 100





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However, for most, the revealing nature of the IEMs, combined with their almost uncanny transparency, generous staging and plenty of slam, will be addictive. It's hard to explain, but with these in-ears, you do seem to become part of the music.

The Cipher cable works seamlessly, and also ensures superior voice clarity during phone calls. That makes it the first choice for iPhone/iPad users — and especially iPhone 7 owners, who no longer have the luxury of a normal 3.5 mm headphone socket.

Of course the iSINE 20 will also work perfectly well with the standard analogue cable, and those high-resolution planar magnetic diaphragms always do a sterling

job of capturing and projecting the full Monty, regardless of cable choice.

However, I have to say that the Cipher cable seems to bring out the best in the iSINE 20s. Listening to Jeff Golub's 'Shuffleboard', from his *Blues For You* set, the Audeze IEMs did an excellent job of capturing the repartee between Golub's searing guitar, a frisky Hammond B3, and a sassy brass section.

Despite a fairly busy mix, the iSINE 20s weren't fazed in the least, retaining a light-footed composure that allowed them to easily keep pace with the musical proceedings. Again, there was that sense of listening through something other

than IEMs — in fact, the sound was not headphone-typical at all, with a greater cohesion and an image projected further forward than is usual with headphones.

The Rolling Stones haven't sounded as gritty, as grimy — as blues-inspired — as they do on *Blue And Lonesome*. It's a no-frills, straight-shooting, foot-tapping set that peels back the years, and makes the Stones sound visceral and irreverent again.

The iSINEs captured the energy and electricity of the band with an enthusiasm that really got my feet tapping. The title track is a Rolling Stones classic in the making, but performed here in a raw, unaffected style that is pure jam session — and the IEMs brought every beat, every riff to the fore.

I never thought I'd enjoy a pair of IEMs as much as I did these. But then, the Audeze iSINE 20s are not your average in-ears, either. Innovative engineering, exemplary build quality and a certain feel-good factor all conspire to make these earphones a desirable addition to any headphone fundi's collection.

Don't be surprised if they end up being the favourites, too ...

Deon Schoeman



Software

Jeff Golub — *Blues For You* (eOne)
 The Rolling Stones — *Blue And Lonesome* (Universal)
 Calexico — *Algiers* (Epitaph)
 The Black Keys — *Turn Blue* (Nonesuch)