



Audeze LCD-XC

Closed-back headphones usually don't appeal to me. I don't like the feeling of being cut off from the outside world, even if it makes for a lower noise floor.

For me, closed-back headphones sound like they've trapped the music, robbing the sound of verve and excitement.

But the Audeze LCD-XC has changed that view completely. These large, beautifully executed headphones, with their glossy, real-wood earcups and soft leather trim, make music in a way that very few headphones do — open-back designs included.

US-made Audeze headphones have already endeared themselves to audiophiles and music lovers around the globe. The open-backed LCD-3, which I reviewed in the August 2015 issue, is a reference-quality component in every respect. Even the much more affordable Sine shares the same planar magnetic transducer technology, despite being an on-ear design.

Back to the LCD-XC, which was the marque's first closed-back design, and remains one of Audeze's top models. Those gleaming Bubinga wood earcups may suggest a measure of old-school charm, but nothing could be further from the truth.

The planar magnetic driver technology is cutting edge, suspending an impressively large, ultra-thin diaphragm between two neodymium magnet arrays, which activate the diaphragms when a music signal is applied.

Theoretically, this arrangement is more efficient than conventional dynamic transducers, and achieves lower distortion levels, while the impedance doesn't fluctuate, which makes them easier to drive accurately. Audeze also employs waveguides to further improve focus and imaging.

The asymmetrical ear cushions and headband padding features soft, lambskin leather, adding to the tactile luxury of the headphones. But they're also solidly engineered, with solid metal inserts for the mini-DIN cable connectors (one for each earcup) and an adjustable headband that slides on solid-metal rods.

The LCD-XC comes in a heavy-duty weatherproof case, accompanied by two

cables. Both feature a pair of mini-DINs at one end for connection to the earcups, but one has a conventional 6.35 mm stereo jack plug at the other end, while the second has a four-pin XLR connector for users with headphone amps offering a balanced output.

At well over half a kilo, this is a heavy

set of cans, which is also my sole point of criticism — despite a perfect fit and ample adjustment scope, I found them too weighty for extended listening. But that's a personal observation.

I used the headphones with a variety of partnering equipment. The lovely ADL Stratos (reviewed recently) has both the



oomph and a balanced out facility, and much of my listening was done in its company, with music sourced from my 13-inch MacBook via USB and Audirvana playback software.

However, I also spent more time than expected with the XCs powered by my diminutive Astell & Kern AK Jr, which packs a reasonable, 1,95 Vrms output punch. That, it transpired, was more than enough to keep the Audeze's transducers satisfied, although the sound lacked the incisive momentum provided by the Stratos.

At the office, the LCD-XC was driven by the headphone amp of a NAD C 320BEE, which sounded clean and airy but with perhaps less bass momentum than when linked to the Stratos.

The point I'm trying to make here is that for all its revealing nature and reference status, the XC has an inherent ability to make the most of the signal and the urge behind it. And while it will point out difference and flaws quite unequivocally, the result always remains musically enjoyable.

The tonal range was something else worth highlighting: like the LCD-3s, the XCs sounded smooth and cordial. Upper trebles were lucidly portrayed, but devoid of any aggression, creating an impression of approachability, but never blunting or blurring the music's resolution.

The midrange was full but never over-saturated, adding heft and authenticity to the sound, but not at the expense of agility or grace. And then there was the bass, presented with real punch and slam, and adding to the stature, the presence and the energy of the music.

Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories* (Sony 96/24 FLAC) sounded so deep, so muscular, so explosive that I thought the XCs would jump right off my head. It's the first time I've experienced headphones that allow you to physically experience bottom-end slam with not so much as a hint of any distortion. That's what big planar transducers can do for music!

Eric Clapton's latest set, *I Still Do* (Surfdog 96/24 FLAC) features the guitar ace in typically mellow mood on a superbly



recorded set that captures the hues and textures of the music with warmth and empathy.

The LCD-XCs portrayed the time-honed rapport between the players, the rich glow of Clapton's sometimes fiery but mostly laid-back and always expressive guitar, and the easy shuffle of the percussion with such intensity that each instrument, each voice leapt from the wide, deep soundstage.

And no, there was no impression of the music sounding hemmed in or constrained – if anything, the Audezes delivered their sonic wares with a generosity of air and space that transcended any sense of physical boundaries. Instead it seemed to easily, faithfully recreate the acoustics and dimensions of the original recording's ambience.

That notion of air, of space and dimension, remained a consistent trait of the LCD-XCs, while their ability to identify and extract fine detail revealed shades, hues and subtleties that would have gone unnoticed otherwise.

Clearly, the Audeze LCD-XC is something special. It's at its best partnered with a good headphone amp, ideally operating in balanced mode, with plenty of wallop to drive it. But it's efficient enough to be partnered by a DAP like the Astell & Kern AK Jr, too – although I think it's too bulky and too heavy to be used on the move.

Most of all, the XC sounds open, accessible, musical and thrilling, regardless of the genre portrayed. It remains truthful, believable and utterly

enthraling – traits that make it one of the headphone world's very best.

Deon Schoeman

VITAL STATS

Type.....Closed-back, circumaural
Transducer typePlanar magnetic
Drivers.....106 mm transducer,
neodymium magnets
Impedance.....20 ohms
Frequency response 5 Hz – 20 kHz
SPL>130 dB @15 watts
Efficiency100 dB/1 mW
Optimal power requirement....1 - 4 watts
Mass650 g

Verdict

A true high-end in every respect: broad tonality and spacious imaging ensure a real sense of 'being there'. Offers a finely detailed, compelling rendered view of the music.

PriceR29 495

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OUR RATING: 89/100

