



HiFiMan HE400S

HiFiMan has become a force in the audiophile headphone market in a relatively short time. The Chinese marque doesn't just make headphones, of course — it also produces top-class digital audio players, headphone amps and an extensive catalogue of accessories.

The HE-400S is easily the marque's most affordable planar magnetic headphone, and perhaps one of the most affordable planar magnetic designs, period. To put that into perspective: the 400S retails for about 10 percent of HiFiMan's flagship HE-1000 headphones.

Admittedly, the HE-1000 is a much more sophisticated design with larger and thinner transducers, fancier finishes and optimised construction. But both share the same, basic planar magnetic driver technology. And you can be sure that the HE-1000 doesn't deliver 10 times the performance.

Depending on what your requirements are, the HE-400S also offers some very real benefits, compared to the HE-1000. It's more compact, and significantly lighter, which promises high comfort levels.

The 400S also features a lower impedance rating, making it easier to drive than the HE-1000: a decent-quality portable digital player like the Astell & Kern HK Junior, or one of HiFiMan's own devices, will more than suffice, and even a smartphone will work, although it won't extract the full potential of the headphones.

The headphone itself looks and feels smart, with silver-hued injection-moulded plastic earcups and yokes, mounted to a headband consisting of a U-shaped tensioned-alloy strip and a broad, slimly padded faux leather headband suspended beneath it.

Headband adjustment is via slots on the alloy strip, which move the padded headband up and down. The earcups can swivel through 180 deg, and are fitted with asymmetrical, velour-trimmed ear pads that are thicker at the rear for optimised fit and alignment.

The arrangement works much better than it looks, providing perfect adjustment and just enough tension to keep the

earcups firmly located around the user's ears, without becoming uncomfortable during longer listening sessions. In fact, I'd say these are among the most comfortable headphones I've worn.

The 400S comes in a smart box, but accessories are sparse. You get a stiff, fabric-sheathed cable, terminated with 2,5 mm jacks for the earcup connections, and a 3,5 mm right-angled stereo jackplug on the other. There's also a 6,35 mm headphone adapter, and a basic manual.

Frankly, I don't need anything more,

but those intent on using the 400S in a portable role might prefer a more pliant cable, and perhaps an in-line remote. On the other hand, let's not forget that this is a headphone with audiophile pretensions, which mitigates against such gadgetry as in-line remotes and microphones.

Much of my listening to the HE-400S was done using two ADL headphone amp/DACs — an ADL Esprit at the office, and the even more talented ADL Stratos at home. In both cases, music files were drawn from a NAS device, and played



back using Audirvana 1.12.5 playback software on a 13-inch MacBook Pro via the Esprit's asynchronous USB input.

However, I also used the 400S with my A&K AK Junior digital audio player, and even with my iPhone 5S and my ageing iPod Classic 160 GB. The results with the AK Jnr were superb – the little player never sounded constrained or under pressure. The iPhone and iPod couldn't match the AK for dynamics and pace, but the sound was still pretty good, and tonally broad.

The review sample was well used, but it's worth noting that HiFi Man recommends a full 150-hour break-in period, during which you may find the 400S sounding less generous in the lower regions, and perhaps a little veiled as far as upper trebles are concerned.

None of those symptoms were prevalent during my time with the review unit though: it sounded instantly engaging and appealing, with that expansive, airy sound typical of well-executed planar designs.

The transparency quotient was particularly impressive, with the sound easily escaping the boundaries of the physical headphones and creating the impression of a large, all-enveloping music picture in which both macro and micro detail were accurately, believably depicted.

Tonally, the HE-400S delivers a full, smooth midrange that does full justice to texture and timbre, yet steers clear of sounding oversaturated. Vocals and instruments were reproduced with substance and believability, and the result was a strong sense of sonic realism.

The trebles and upper frequencies were lucid and detailed, but without becoming too clinically clean. On Toto's often ignored 'Tambu' (Sony 44,1/16 WAV), the trebles can tend towards fizziness, but the 400S kept them well in check, while making the most of the three-dimensional sound picture to create an immersive, involving listening experience.

While the 400S couldn't reach down into skull-resonating sub-bass territory, and lacked ultimate slam, the bass response was still substantial enough to endow the sound with a solid, structured foundation.

I particularly enjoyed the carefully



layered dimensionality of the sonic image created by the 400S – it really was walk-in realistic, with a strong spatial quality that was cohesively sustained across all three dimensional planes.

Leonard Cohen's voice on 'Show Me The Place', from *Popular Problems* (Columbia 44,1/16 AIFF) sounded almost eerily real, his voice presiding regally over the accompanying piano, Hammond B3 and strings. The sound was transparent enough to showcase slivers of fine detail all too easily lost in less meticulous systems, while always contextualising those details to the benefit of the music.

The power and the delicacy of Camille Saint-Saëns' *Introduction & Rondo Capriccioso For Violin and Orchestra* featuring soloist Noah Geller with the Kansas Symphony Orchestra (Reference Recordings 176,4/24 WAV) was riveting, transporting me right into the heart of the music, with the instruments seeming almost real enough to touch.

The 400S easily recreated the expansive sound picture, and coloured it in with vivid hues and textures, while rendering the pace and dynamics of the performance with committed realism.

The HiFiMan 400S headphones are sonically and musically exceptional. They deserve to be partnered by a good-quality headphone amp, and will shine at their brightest when presented with fine recordings. But they are inherently musical, and not so critical that you hear

more flaws than music. In that sense, they make the most of what's on offer.

But here's the real cherry on top: as far as sheer value goes, the HiFiMan 400S is virtually unbeatable, offering levels of transparency, coherence, dimensionality and sheer musicality that easily eclipse their asking price.

Deon Schoeman

VITAL STATS

Type..... Open-back, circumaural
 Transducer type Planar magnetic
 Impedance..... 22 ohms
 Frequency response ... 20 Hz – 35 kHz
 Sensitivity 98 dB
 Mass..... 350 g
 Cable length..... 1,5 m

Verdict

Hugely entertaining, engaging headphones that combine generous, airy staging and pin-point imaging with ample sonic substance. Unexpectedly comfortable, too – and easy to drive.

Price R6 990

Supplied by C-Plan Audio
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Website www.cplanaudio.co.za

OUR RATING: 89/100

