



Small Paradise

Listening via headphones is the most original form of audiophile pleasure. Yet, even purism can be increased: by a transformer-less triode amp. Read the story of a small, affordable dream combo.

We are controlled by a peculiar kind of Pavlov effect. As soon as the word 'headphones' is dropped, we think of a poor sort of compromise. Or of the poor father of three who is forced by consideration for his relatives to put on the headphones when he wants to listen to his favourite music in the evening. And anyway: Great music requires large speakers, large rooms. This is, of course, nonsense and nothing but a cliché.

'Headphoning' is the highest form of concentration. You can't get closer to the music. It's an intimate moment demanding, most of all, what should exist in large amounts between the headphone diaphragms – spirit. So let's define a reverse Pavlov effect: Headphoners are the cleverer people, the real analysts in the world of the audiophile.

But the right tool is missing in many cases. The number of manufacturers of very good speakers and sophisticated power amplifiers is considerably higher, while there is a distinctive lack of really good headphone amplifiers. Ten fingers are enough to count them all. Now, in another sentimental Pavlov effect, the 'Orpheus' comes up. This was a legendary headphone amplifier, built by Sennheiser 20 years ago (feels like 75 years to me) in order to adorn their company history as the non plus ultra, with a corresponding pair of electrostatic phones. It is rumoured that it really existed, though few have seen it, and even less have

experienced it. One who was really close to the legend, who even helped further the development of the Orpheus, is Dr. Burkhardt Schwäbe, and he cannot let go of it. Now, he introduced a new amplifier the foremost aim of which is to be affordable.

2,000 euros is all Schwäbe charges for the Basic Line version. Of course, that's still a lot of money, but it is little in comparison to the huge effort Schwäbe makes with his company Eternal Arts, mainly in the sector of tube amps. The current catalogue lists three models in this category. The parent ship is called KHV (Kopfhörer-Verstärker, simply meaning headphone amp). Obviously, Schwäbe uses words with the same efficiency as he uses circuits. The KHV will receive two siblings, these days – a 'pro' version with XLR connectors for sound engineers and the Basic line for home users. The big KHV sets you back 2,990 euros. From this model Schwäbe omitted the rounded casing and knobs milled from solid metal, adding the XLR connectors to create the Pro – clocking in at 2,700 euros. The Basic, finally, had to shed the two stabilizer tubes from the circuit board, passive elements taking over the job. The rest of the fittings are identical. Among these is a transformer from Transtec, made to measure by request of Eternal Arts – moulded, with protective windings between the primary and secondary winding packet. Further additions are an ALPS pot and gold-plated Neutrik RCA plugs.

Apart from this, Dr. Schwäbe has accumulated a private treasure: He keeps more than 10,000 tubes in storage. This is a clever foresight in two respects: Firstly, the competitors on the market are drained of raw material, and secondly, anyone 'swimming' in such a fundus can easily find perfectly matching pairs. With the Basic as with its sister models, highly selected triode-pentodes are used, multiple tubes with the code PCL86. In beautiful symmetry. The circuit follows the principles of Julius Futterman, a genius, lone wolf and autodidact long dead. According to insider lore, he built power amplifiers on the kitchen table in his two-room flat in the Bronx – after the OTL principle. 'Output TransformerLess' is the formula of this concept: The output transformer is abolished, and a little complementary circuit between the tubes takes its place. The benefit lies mostly in speed and in the omitted limitation. Unexpected 375,000 hertz is the value, Schwäbe states as the highest realisable frequency. That's probably from where the name of his enterprise originates: Eternal Arts – art for eternity.

And back again? Schwäbe is well rooted in the terrestrial realm. Sennheiser adopted the headphone amplifiers into their own distribution system. Together they develop and advocate the ideal combination with headphone top model HD 800. In this context, it is permissible to ask whether this is free-riding or a rare case of audiophile symbiosis between >



Delicatessen – almost in full size: The main part of the sound work is carried out by two triode-pentodes immediately behind the front and ALPS pot. Very small in the middle: two (red) micro switches – to allow the use of low-ohmic headphones.



Symmetric front: two equal output jacks. Asymmetric back: cinch input jacks. Contemporaneously, Eternal Arts produce a 'pro' version – with XLR input jacks.

large and small. Are Eternal Arts glad to be able to supply to such a powerful sparring partner? Or shouldn't Sennheiser be glad to be able to offer products for which, being a company specialising in headphones and microphones these days, they don't have any manufacturing possibilities?

We shouldn't escalate this issue, but rather be glad that Dr. Schwäbe's headphone amplifiers exist at all. So what is it that distinguishes the Basic? In our test, we expected a 'typical' tube sound, and we were generously engulfed. The harmonic aspect was strong and dominant, combined with surprising thrust. Music, you thought you knew in all its facets, was transmuted by the Basic. To express it in a more pictorial way: This was no longer the oil painting on the wall, not even the relief, but the three-dimensional, sculptural representation. The danger of a 'larger than life' impression came up. Yet, after one hour of listening, that was exactly what you longed for. Glenn Gould's humming and moaning during the subsequent recording of the Goldberg Variations, for example, were not the bizarre background noise as which they appeared when listened to via a pair of speakers. Rather they were an authentic, vivid aspect of the recording – and very intimate aspect indeed. It's a rare occasion to experience the triangle of artist, technology and listener in such an intense, reduced and direct way. It was almost frighteningly present when using the recommended chain with the Sennheiser's HD 800. Or take the recently mastered EMI Beatles tapes – millions of people have listened to these recor-

dings billions of times. Yet, even a seemingly one-dimensional sunshine hit such as McCartney's 'Penny Lane' ascended to a highly complex psycho ballad – the background vocals, small spatial information, flowed from the background into your consciousness. This is the pinnacle of the HD 800 plus Basic set: There was no more background.

We switched to Beyerdynamic's T1. The three-dimensional impression was slightly reduced, the analysis shifted: A large orchestra commanded a different kind of spatial coherence, the mix made a more logical impression, particularly

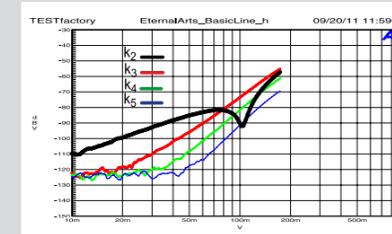
with a late Romantic Bruckner. The overall conclusion, however: It's a matter of taste. (Semi-ironic: Maybe that's why the Basic has two headphone outputs – to enable you to quickly and comfortably switch between the best headphones). Most of all it's a distinction for the Basic Line, being capable of offering such a wealth of information. There are many products you like among the testing environment of an editorial office. There are few you love, and even less you desire to own. In this respect, the Basic is a definite desire-to-own candidate. A new Pavlov effect has come over us. <

Eternal Arts Basic line

List price: €2,000
Warranty: 3 years
Weight: 3.7 kg
Dimensions (WxHxD): 17 x 13.5 x 31.5 cm

Distribution:
Sennheiser Vertrieb und Service GmbH & Co. KG
Raiffeisenstraße 23 / 25
D-49124 Georgsmarienhütte
Germany
Telephone: +49 (0)5401 / 497 200
www.sennheiser.de
www.neumann.com
www.audioclassica.de

Distortion Characteristics



K2 is a bit more restrained with higher voltages; otherwise the distortion characteristics proceed harmoniously and are perfectly graded. Frequency response (not shown) at the 600-ohms speaker is perfectly linear from 10 Hz to 50K; with low-ohmic speakers (32 ohms) slight attenuation in the deep bass.



Test CD Bach: Goldberg- Variationen

Glenn Gould's second recording of the Goldberg Variations is rich in millions of bits of information – including the humming and moaning of the pianist. Annoying with bad chains – a mythical unity with good ones.



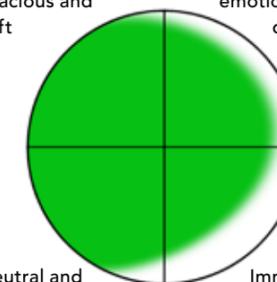
The author Andreas Günther

Uses magnetostatic speakers, yet has also been a keen user of headphones since his youth. He has all the most important headphones of the last 20 years hanging on his wall. What impresses him: the triumph of dynamic transducers in relation to the electrostats. The current generation is the best ever.

AUDIOphile Character

Effortlessly spacious and soft

Grippingly emotional and dynamic



Neutral and authentic

Immediacy high resolution

AUDIOphile Potential



Recommendation

HD 800 and Basic suit one another ideally, a fact, however, that doesn't make the latter deaf to other manufacturers' devices. These will, for the most part, underline the harmonic advantages of the tubes.