

# SERIOUS HEADPHONES FOR SERIOUS MUSIC

Terry Lane

**That Count Nikolaus (“The Magnificent”) Esterhazy had the right idea; if you want to hear orchestral music and opera in the home then buy yourself an orchestra. Even better, buy a composer to go with it. It would certainly be cheaper than buying a really good audio system.**



A chap could easily spend half a million on esoteric gear and still not have a decent approximation of the concert hall or opera house experience. The problem is space. The concert hall is big and the stage is wide and deep. The hall itself is like an all-embracing instrument in which the music is made, projected and reverberated. Until we have some sort of sonic hologram that can realistically recreate the three dimensions of the hall listening experience high fidelity may be high, but it won't be faithful.

With that dismal truth in mind I went in search of headphones suitable for our sort of music. Obviously, because the market demands it, most headphones are made for the *doof doof* crowd. Bass is emphasised at the expense of subtle tonality. So most of the headphones on offer, including the very expensive noise cancelling type, are not really suitable for listening to serious music.

I was looking for over-ear headphones, not ear buds, and they come in two types, completely closed and open back. Sennheiser call this form “open circumaural headphones”. This is the opposite of noise-cancelling because they are open to ambient noise and they also can be faintly heard by anyone nearby. They are not for use on the train or when someone else is in the room.

Many of the best – read “most expensive” – headphones are open back for a reason. While fully enclosed headphones keep all the music in the head between the two ears the open backs give a subtle impression of a soundstage that extends beyond the ears. It is both wider and more precise. It is easy to visualise the place of individual instruments or singers.

Take, for example, Melba's Super Audio Compact Disc recording of the Adelaide production of *The Ring*, praised by the *Gramophone* [UK] as: “Sensationally recorded. The best sounding *Ring* on record to date, bar none.” Listening to the *Entry of the Gods into Walhalla* on open back Sennheisers gives an impressive feeling for the width and depth of the Wagnerian orchestra and for the position and movement of the singers across the stage and moving from front to back. It is an engrossing listening experience, not done full justice by loudspeakers.

Not being as rich as Nikolaus The Magnificent I couldn't justify the Sennheiser HD 800S at \$2600. These are described as the company's very best off-the-shelf unit, meaning that they do also have a custom made headphone that sells for tens of thousands of dollars if you are interested and only the best will do.

So, facing reality, I looked further down the catalogue and settled on the HD700, which cost about \$1000. Filled with buyer anxiety but reassured by favourable reviews from owners of the product I ordered a pair.

The first record I listened to with the new headphones was Melba's pioneering Super Audio Compact Disc of Richard Bonyngue conducting Orchestra Victoria in *La somnambule*, ballet music of Ferdinand Hérold. This was the first SACD of classical music released by an Australian label. The music is happy and witty and represents conversations between the mute dancers. The instruments talk to each other in the soundstage which has been recorded in the Iwaki Auditorium in Melbourne with a nicely judged feeling of space and airiness by Sound Engineer Phil Rowlands. I have never heard it to better advantage or with a greater sense of immersion in the music making than with the Sennheisers.

Melba's first recording session at SACD sampling rate and bit depth was actually with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra accompanying Gregory Yurisich singing *The Floral Dance – and other Peter Dawson favourites*. It was originally released as a standard CD but later remastered and released as an SACD. Yurisich's voice and his precise articulation of the rapid fire words is reproduced to perfection on this disc and with the Sennheisers it is like being in the Tasmanian Government House ballroom where the recording was made. I should know because I was there.

Serious music lovers crave bass just as much as the *doof doof* people, only it is a different sort of bass. We respond to the deep grumble and plunk of the double bass in orchestral or jazz music. The double bass, after all, does produce the lowest frequency sound in the orchestra, nowhere better heard than in the third movement of Beethoven's *Fifth* where they play the first notes of a theme that then is taken up by one section after another, moving across the stage from right to left. Beethoven enjoyed the effect so much that he repeated it three more times.

With the Sennheisers the bass rumble begins a degree to the right of the right ear, an effect characteristic of the wider stage of the open earphones. And the sequence finishes with the high violins a degree beyond the left ear. It is a beautiful thing.

If you want to hear true, acoustic, unamplified gut-shaking bass just listen to the lower reaches of Yo Yo Ma's cello as he essays the Bach suites. There is so much going on in this extraordinary music making that you don't hear through speakers. The headphones put you in the front seat, face to face with the musician, for an uncanny listening experience.

Listening to Harry James' direct-to-disc LP *Comin' from a good place* (as pure as analogue gets) the soundstage is uncannily wide and deep. The Sennheisers are perfect for jazz, with piano, trumpet, sax, bass and drums all nicely defined in the sound picture. They also make the re-imagining of Mozart's *Rondo alla turca* by The Galapagos Duck (LP recorded in Sydney in 1977) even more whimsically delightful.

However – there is always a however – the HD 700s are not in the business of turning sows' ears into silk purses. Bad recordings are exposed in all their horror, even discs that I always thought were perfectly acceptable. I have a fondness for a 1957 mono recording of show favourites performed by Ella and Louis. Playing uncritically through loudspeakers I had never noticed the audio quality one way or another. Through the Sennheisers the sound is flat, muddy and altogether unacceptable. I fear there are some nasty surprises in store as I work my way through the record collection.

The Sennheisers are comfortable in two ways – they are comfortable to wear and because of the smooth and natural sound they are comfortable to listen to for extended periods. They are expensive but still quite a lot cheaper than keeping your own orchestra at home. The booze bills alone would soon surpass the price of the headphones.

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