

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
STAX



All in your head

Do you need to keep your music to yourself? With a headphone system as good as this, **Ed Selley** thinks you might just want to

The bass response is deeper than you might expect and wonderfully full and textured at the same time



Last year, I was delighted to become a father for the first time. While I've generally found the whole experience to be brilliant, there's no escaping the fact I have less time to listen to music. When I do get the chance, I'm often pushed towards using headphones to keep the noise down. I don't begrudge this – I have access to some excellent headphones and I know that this isn't forever.

What if it was forever though? I'd never really considered the possibility of a life beyond speakers up until this point, but spending time 'buttoned up' got me thinking. Is it possible to

have a headphone setup that doesn't merely provide an alternative to speakers when you can't make any noise, but actually provides a superior listening experience? Up until very recently, I would have doubted that such a thing was possible, but after some time spent with this little ensemble I'm not so sure.

What we have here isn't merely a pair of headphones and a headphone amplifier, it is instead probably the ultimate expression of headphones. It uses technology that is complex and difficult to perfect and that requires a unique product to make it function at all. This is not a convenience item for

COMPONENTS

STAX SR-009 £3,695

The ultimate expression of the Stax Electrostatic Earspeaker principle, the SR-009 uses an all new electrostatic driver alongside a completely revised industrial design.

STAX SRM-007TII ENERGISER KIMIK EDITION £2,295

The SRM-007TII is the flagship energiser that acts as both headphone preamp and the powerplant for the electrostatic drivers. The Kimik Edition features specific modifications to further improve the overall performance.

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM STAX



use only when you can't make too much noise, it's something different.

Stax has been making distinctive audio products since 1938, and 2014 marks the 60th anniversary of its first electrostatic product – a tweeter that saw the light of light of day in 1954. Six years later, the company launched its first headphones – and from the outset termed them 'Earspeakers' – that made use of the same principle.

Insane in the membrane

Some 56 years of evolution brings us to the SR-009 you see here. The flagship of the current range is the culmination of everything Stax knows about headphones placed in a single utterly compromise-free package. The electrostatic membranes – that create sound via an electrical current being passed across them – are a new ultra-thin polymer type. These are in turn motivated by new 'MLER' Electrodes that provide a more even drive. These drivers are placed in enclosures that are round for the first time in years instead of the classic rectangle that we associate with Stax.

As with any Stax Earspeaker setup, the SR-009 is only half of the story. The electrostatic drivers need current to run that is far beyond the ability of a conventional headphone amp to deliver, which means that the SR-009

is partnered with the SRM-007tII. Stax describes this as an 'Energiser' – a three input headphone amp that also generates the required power to run the electrostatic drivers. This particular energiser has been through an upgrade process carried out by UK distributor Symmetry Systems. This ensures that the quartet of valves are cryogenically treated and partnered with a replacement high-quality mains fuse. These detail changes

The quality is a level up from anything I've ever seen on a pair of headphones

unlock a considerable performance boost from what is already an extremely capable device.

As a partnership, the two devices are understated but the more time you spend with them the more you appreciate the level of care and attention that has gone into them. I'm not going to pretend that the SR-009 is anything other than a very large sum of money but hold them in your hands and you start to appreciate that they are wonderful things. There is no ostentation or unnecessary decoration anywhere on the SR-009, but the

Above left: The SRM-007 is a three-input amp able to drive two pairs of earspeakers at once

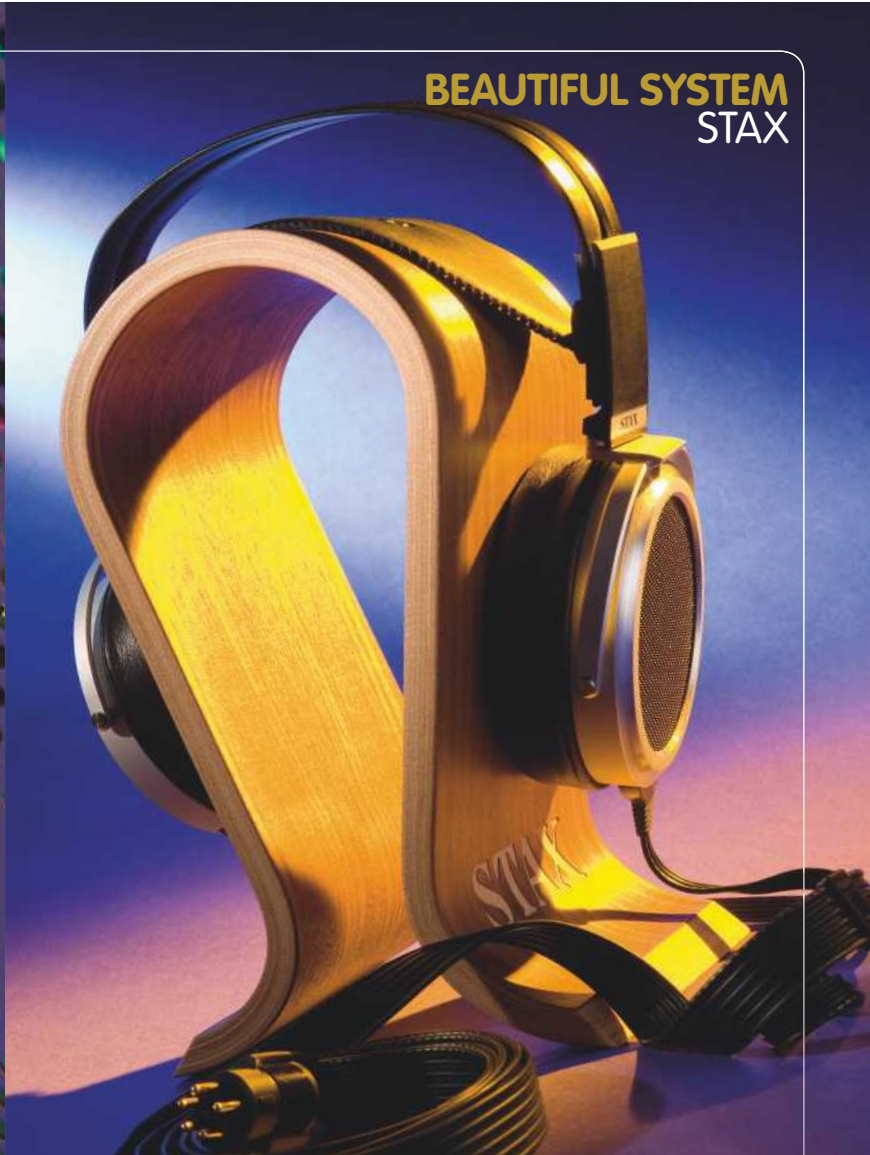
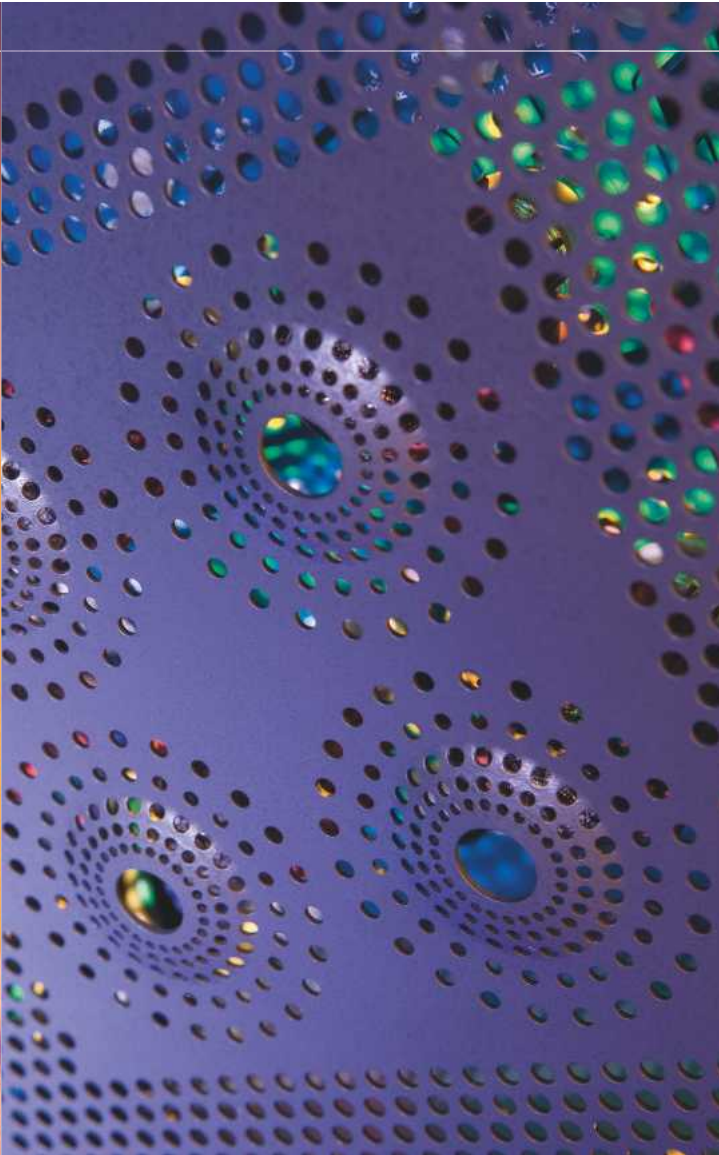
Above: The build quality and attention to detail is outstanding

Above far right: The SR-009 is big, but supremely comfortable

quality of the materials is simply a level up from anything I've seen in a pair of headphones. The Stax also manage to come across as substantial and yet at the same time avoid feeling like a high-end neck workout when you wear them. In fact, I think that the SR-009 is the most comfortable design that Stax has produced. The floating inner headband combined with the perfect spring loading of the outer section make for a pair of headphones that you can wear pretty much indefinitely.

The look of love

The SRM-007tII energiser is similarly elegant and understated. The Stax offers one XLR and two RCA inputs that are available to two pairs of Stax Earspeakers (allowing for his 'n' hers listening if you fancy) as well as looping back out to an amplifier should you hang on to conventional speakers after investing in it. Operation is self-explanatory and an object lesson in simplicity. It might be easy to describe the SRM-007tII as retro, but in this case, I don't really think that's fair. The Stax look like, well, a Stax. The functionality is so completely self explanatory and the design so effective that there is no need to change it. Fetishists of high-quality controls (of which I



might be one) will also note that the volume control is perfectly weighted and geared – not just well done, but perfect. There's no remote, you'd only lose it through lack of use.

Lack of use is not an issue that is likely to befall the Stax duo themselves, though. Ensure that the SRM-007tII has a few minutes of warming up behind it and supply it with some decent sources and you will find yourself understanding the asking price in three minutes and justifying to yourself why you need a pair in five. There are attributes this duo possess that are untouchable in any other listening device be it headphone or conventional speaker.

Driving ambition

Trying to put my finger on why has taken a little while, but I think it stems from the use of electrostatic drivers in a way that enhances their strengths and virtually eliminates the weaknesses. I love electrostatic speakers – their speed, tonal accuracy and lack of crossover deliver an immediacy that can leave cone speakers floundering – having said that, I'm not blind to their faults. The limited bass response, indifferent volume output and definite listening sweet spot have ensured that I've never taken the plunge.



CONTACT
DETAILS

TELEPHONE:
01727 865488

WEBSITE:
symmetry-systems.
co.uk
stax.co.jp

The Stax deliver all the positives in spades – indeed this might be the single most revealing transducer I've ever used – but the nature of their use obviates the problems that affect their full-size brethren. As they are on either side of your head, the sweet spot is impossible to miss and with a smaller area to drive, the bass response is deeper than you might expect and wonderfully full and textured at the same time. Sensitivity

The volume control is perfectly weighted – not just well done, but perfect

isn't an issue either. Anyone seeking to boil the fluid in their inner ear might need to look elsewhere, but for everyone else there should be more than enough headroom on offer.

This means that listening to the Stax is almost otherworldly at times. There is little sense of the performance coming from a pair of headphones and the SR-009 has a soundstage that many conventional speakers would kill for. There is a complete lack of constraint to the presentation that makes something with a little scale utterly spellbinding. There's no such

thing as a quick listening session with the SR-009 – I pretty much had to be dragged away from them on more than a few occasions to return to the business of parenting.

Head of the class

These Stax headphones make a case for themselves that goes far beyond being the best way to listen without making excess noise, although they deliver on that brief effortlessly. More than this, for me at least, the Stax are also the ultimate implementation of an electrostatic speaker. Half a century of painstaking evolution has produced something truly extraordinary and quite magnificent and at the same time ensured that the SR-009 and SRM-007tII are utterly practical and quite up to the task of being used day in day out, being no more difficult to use (and a great deal more comfortable) than a pair of £50 cans you could pick up in your local Argos store.

This everyday greatness is what sets amazing products out from the pack and rarely is it more apparent than it is here. You can choose this combo knowing that you could live without a pair of box loudspeakers and still appear saintly in the eyes of your neighbours. Rarely has considerate behaviour been so much fun ●