



STAX SR-007 & SRM-007TII

Does this 'earspeaker' and 'energiser' combination add up to make the world's best headphones?

PRICE £2,795 **CONTACT** Symmetry, Suite 5, 17 Holywell Hill, St Albans AL1 1DT ☎ 01727 865488 🌐 www.stax.co.jp

Here's what may appear to be a trivial question: are what you see in the accompanying photo headphones or earspeakers? Stax has long called its 'phones earspeakers rather than the more usual designation, and we'll use the term here, partly because there is a subtle and useful distinction to be drawn. Stax spaces its capsules a little away from the ears, which gives a somewhat more speaker-like behaviour, though it doesn't go the extra mile by introducing inter-channel crosstalk. Stax is a long way from being the only company to make 'phones this way: AKG, Ergo, Sennheiser and Beyer also do so, and these brands are just the tip of the iceberg. But it is useful in a review context to make a clear distinction between 'phones of this type and the kind of rubbish you shove in your ears

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when using a personal stereo, whose geometry is absolutely inimical to good sound quality no matter how well engineered they may be. So, earspeakers it is.

The SR-007 is the top earspeaker in the Stax armoury, and the ARM-007 the top energiser, or it was until the SRM-007tII was launched. This is the top-of-the-range version of the four-valve energiser, which is itself up-market of the basic two-valve energiser. There are solid state energisers too, but we won't talk about them. Because the changes were specified and engineered by Kimik, a company owned by one Mick North, the resident engineer for Stax in the UK, it has become known as the Kimik modified version.

The package, then, consists of two parts: the SR-007 earspeaker and the SRM-007tII valve energiser. The business part of the bit you wear has a circular section which sits circumaurally, with a variable-thickness, leather-covered ear cushion, which can be rotated within limits to produce the desired ear seal. These are velocity 'phones, so the back of the enclosure is vented. The diaphragm, gold plated at the edges, has a larger active area than those in other Stax earspeakers, and is mounted in a metal frame inside a thick, insulated, low-resonance outer section. The speakers are connected by a springy hoop and a pliable inner cushioned section. According to Stax, the frequency

response is 6Hz to 41kHz, and the weight is 365g (not including the cable).

The hot-running energiser uses two-stage MOSFET amplification and a four-valve output stage, with Philips 6FQ7 small-signal valves whose heater source is built around an electrolytic capacitor and a high-speed Schottky barrier diode. Connections are to an XLR balanced input, a single-ended input, and a second single-ended input with matching output, effectively making the energiser a full-on preamp – and an unusually transparent one at that – controlled by two friction-coupled volume potentiometers. For the Kimik modifications, the Philips valves are specially selected, low-tolerance tubes from old (unused) stocks. Their pins are gold plated and the valves are cryogenically treated, a process that takes

up to four weeks. They are then fitted with EAT tube dampers, which consist of machined aluminium heatsinks damped by rubber gaskets. The main change, however, is to the set-up of the amplifier, which is minutely adjusted to minimise distortion. This is said to make a big difference and takes several days to complete.

A sample of the standard SRM-007 energiser was obtained for direct comparison with the Kimik modified version, and both were kept under power and run in parallel from the Esoteric CD/SACD player reviewed on p74 of this issue, using Nordost Valhalla and Odin interconnect cables.

It was quickly apparent which of the two energisers was better, but if all you had was the basic model in your system we doubt that you'd feel you were missing out on anything you couldn't live without. The basic character of the sound using the SRM-007 has a slight softness and natural sense of distance. It does not shout, even with the volume turned too high for the Health and Safety police, and a balance that is ripe and full, with a pleasing warmth and tremendous extension at both ends of the frequency spectrum. But the Kimik version has the standard model comprehensively beaten. It is sharper and leaner, with more detail and articulation. The musical effect is of greater transparency and focus. It is certainly a little lighter on its feet,

but it could never be accused of being bright or edgy. It is, in fact, easily the best balanced earspeaker, headphone or whatever you choose to call it that we have ever encountered. This comes as no surprise. Stax wrote the book on this kind of product, and this model encapsulates everything the company knows.

There are other differences, too. The Kimik model is a little sharper and leaner, with more detail and articulation, yet at the same time it has a beguiling, seductive quality all its own, and an even greater ability to track the dynamics of the music. There is greater structural attack and focus from the enhanced model, and greater detail resolution, too, which means a more expressive and clearer account of the music, and even less overhang. It is important to understand that it is not so much better that it devalues the excellent performance of the standard model, yet you will always know and appreciate just where the extra expenditure has gone.

The SR-007 is no lightweight, so you always know it's there, but you know it in the same way that you always know when you're wearing a particularly fine yet substantial piece of clothing such as a Crombie overcoat. The Stax sits firmly enough on the head to be completely secure; its footprint is widely spread, there are no hotspots and the ears are well enough ventilated that they don't heat up unduly. This is a model that can be worn for hours on end playing music at virtually any volume level, and the lack of environmental soundproofing is such that that you are not totally cut off from the fire alarm sounding next door. No guarantees, though... ■■■

Alvin Gold

