

Perreaux Silhouette SXH1

Serious headphone amp for serious listeners

By Michael Jones

Perreaux Silhouette SXH1 headphone amplifier. \$699

On his visits to see his first born, my father has seen some weird and wonderful hi-fi contraptions in my lounge. Most of them he's greeted with bemusement, but the one thing that had him puzzled was a headphone amp. After all, why on earth would anyone need one?

That's a good question, and one that may also be occupying your mind. Most amplifiers and CD players come with a headphone socket, so a dedicated amp seems to be superfluous.

Or maybe not. The headphone outputs on most amps and CD players are afterthoughts and are not designed for the highest sound quality. They're compromised and don't give the best possible for your headphone listening.

There are a number of people who, by preference or necessity, spend a lot of their listening time under headphones. If you're one of them, then you should investigate a dedicated headphone amplifier, such as the new Perreaux Silhouette model.

It must be more than a decade since I tried my first dedicated headphone amplifier. It was a modest unit from QED, but even so I was amazed at how much better my headphones sounded through the QED than my upmarket Sony CD player.

The big Perreaux

I'm used to Perreaux amps being huge and heavy, but the Silhouette SXH1 is anything but. It's a "half width" component, being 215mm wide, 170mm deep and a mere 57mm high. The Silhouette weighs in at 1.4kg.

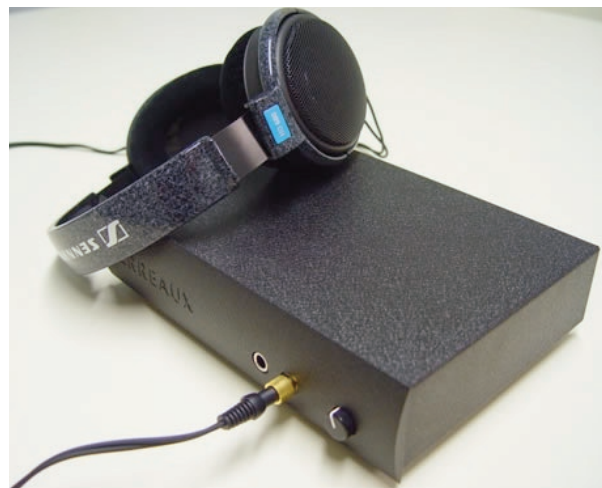
Externally the Perreaux looks very simple. Finished in black, with the front panel in some kind of "crackle" finish, the unit looks almost nondescript. The Perreaux logo is engraved towards the left of the front panel.

On the front is not one, but two 6.35mm headphone sockets. I guess this allows two people to listen at once. Also on the front is a volume knob. Perreaux describe this as a "high quality, machined aluminium knob" but I found it too small to easily get my fingers around and – on my sample at least – the control scraped against the front panel.

The rear panel has both RCA inputs

and outputs, allowing the Perreaux to be placed in a tape loop without losing the use of the loop.

But the real news on the rear panel is the IEC power socket. Every other headphone amp I've reviewed comes with one of those annoying wall wart plugs. The Perreaux has a toroidal transformer inside the case – a nice touch.



Under the cans

The headphone socket of my Denon AV receiver does a good job of driving my Sennheisser 580 headphones, so I took that as a baseline for comparisons with the Perreaux.

I think it's fair to say that the Perreaux Silhouette was superior in every way.

High frequencies were cleaner and clearer through the Perreaux, making the Denon sound somewhat "dirty". Cymbals had less hash surrounding them and were more easily differentiated.

Female vocals, such as on Eleanor McEvoy's brilliant (and superbly recorded) *Yola* album, also showed a big improvement. Again, cleaner and clearer, but also with a natural sense of body.

Bass is always troublesome for headphone listening, mainly I believe because through headphones you only hear bass, not feel it.

But bass on the Perreaux Silhouette is one of its strongest points. Bass instruments through the Perreaux are incredibly solid and deep. Even better, textures of bass instruments were easily differentiated, allowing me to – for example – listen into bass lines.

The hi-fi attributes all added up in favour of the Perreaux Silhouette. But more importantly, musical attributes were much better as well.

For example, voices did not just sound cleaner, they also were far more articulate, allowing lyrics to be more easily heard. Plus the small vocal inflections that make a voice real, which are often lessened by many hi-fi components, came through very well.

Simply serious

Serious headphone listeners have a number of dedicated headphone amps to choose from these days. The Perreaux Silhouette is a well priced unit that offers a superb performance. Headphone listeners owe it to their ears to hear it.

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