

Perreaux SXH2

Perreaux SXH2 headphone amplifier. \$899

It only seems like yesterday that I reviewed Perreaux's first headphone amplifier, the SXH1. In fact it was October 2003. That still seems like a short time for a company that prides itself in the longevity of its products. The SXH1 was developed at the behest of one of Perreaux's overseas distributors who specified what they wanted and, most importantly, what they were prepared to pay for it.

The boffins at Perreaux always knew that they could build a better headphone amplifier with a bigger budget. And now they have.

All change

Externally there are three important changes over the SXH1. The most obvious change is the new silver finish on the front panel. The most useful change is a larger volume control, instead of the pissy little one on the SXH1. The most

geek-friendly change is the gain selection switch on the back - this optimises the gain of the amplifier to

work with the wildly differing sensitivities and impedances of various headphones.

Inside there's a new circuit board, better parts, improved earthing and a better potentiometer (that's the volume control).

One feature of the SXH1 which I'm delighted has stayed is the internal power supply. Like its predecessor, the SXH2 has a power supply transformer built into the case, so you don't need to deal with another "wall wart" power supply.

Serious listeners only

When I mentioned the Perreaux and its price to a couple of people, they were surprised that a headphone amplifier could cost so much. Which goes to support my contention that serious headphone

listeners are a small, serious and often misunderstood group.

Spending \$899 on a headphone amplifier - along with a decent amount for a quality pair of headphones - certainly separates you from the crowd. A dedicated headphone amplifier is certainly not for everyone.

To look at buying a unit such as the SXH2 you need to be spending a lot of time already wearing cans. This may be because of domestic arrangements (families can seriously disrupt listening time!) or that you can spend most of you work day listening to your favourite music, as long as no one else has to listen to it.

Private cruising

I had a number of decent listening sessions with the SXH2 in my home system (fed from the tape output of my Plinius 8150, with sources being a Meridian 508.20 and my old Thorens TD-150/Audio Technica OC9). My headphones are the Sennheiser 580, a higher impedance headphone with a reputation of being somewhat difficult to drive properly.

I was very impressed with the results. Part of the joy of headphone listening is the amount of information that reaches your ears, compared to listening through loudspeakers.

Listening to classical works, it was easy to hear low level detail such as the reverberations that make up the sound of the hall, while still listening in to the various orchestral sections.

Voices in particular were very well portrayed, as were instruments with a lot of higher frequency energy. In fact it was the Perreaux's performance in the higher frequencies that were the crowning glory of the SXH2.

Bass always sounds a little strange to me through headphones, as the physical nature of sound waves hitting my body are missing. Bass instruments



(bass guitar, drums etc) however came across very well, being very clear and articulated.

One sign of a well-sorted piece of audio electronics is when you can hear a wealth of detail without it being thrust into your ears, or without that detail turning harsh. The SXH2 displayed a wealth of detail through my Sennheisers, without any sign of harshness or electronic dirtiness. This makes long-term listening a breeze.

Comparing the SXH2 with the Rega Ear headphone amp was illuminating. I rate the Ear very highly, as it's a big step up from the headphone stages found in most amplifiers. Comparing both using my Sennheiser 580s, I found that the SXH2 was the better unit, being cleaner and clearer across the whole frequency range and allowing me to hear into the recording more. The SXH2 damned well better be the better sounding unit though, as it costs twice as much.

I would have liked to compare this unit to the original SXH1, but that was not possible in the time available. I do know people who have both and who report that the new model is an improvement over the old. Another obvious comparison is to the similarly priced Musical Fidelity X-Can v3. However, Musical Fidelity products are unavailable to AudioEnz.

Conclusion

Serious headphone listeners need a pair of serious headphones and a serious headphone amplifier. The Perreaux SXH2 fills the latter role admirably at a decent price. This is a "must listen" for a serious headphone user—*Michael Jones*

This is a "must listen" for a serious headphone user

Inside the case is the built-in power supply - no "wall warts" to deal with!

