



Q, has hidden talents

Headphones are great: you plug them in, put them on, and listen. But the AKG N90Q puts takes the whole idea much further...

Numerous visitors to the STEREO booth at the headphone trade fair CanJam sneaked a curious look at the brand new AKG N90Q headphones. That was no surprise: after all, legendary musician and producer Quincy Jones had helped in the model's development and sonic signature.

The Viennese company, with its long tradition (latterly as part of the Harman Group), has never had any shortage of extravagant headphones in its selection: just think of the K340, with its combination of electrostatic speaker and dynamic chassis, or the legendary K1000 full-electrostatic speakers. These products were as unusual as they were technically

sophisticated, and set standards in terms of sound.

The path of the N90Q into the sound elite, using modern insights from acoustics research and electronics developments, is also a success story: for example, its TruNote calibration to the hearing of the wearer (by means of two microphones placed in front of the membrane) works perfectly. At the push of a button, this system compensates for individual hearing characteristics as well as reflections within the earpiece due to different ear sizes and shapes, not to mention the headphones' placement over the ears. The tolerances of the 52mm drive unit, its diaphragm



▲ The high-quality case also contains a USB connection for charging.



◀ The cushioned headband is adjustable in steps and comfortable to wear ; the cable connects on the right side.

made from Japanese paper, is also fine-tuned – a clever approach.

However, the Q 90 can offer even more: innovative always-on noise canceling makes it possible to listen at moderate volumes even in noisy surroundings, and is also clearly effective in reducing distortion.

A sonic playground

A button on the left housing adjusts the sound balance – lighter or darker – depending on your personal taste. There is also an acoustic neutral position which is signaled by a beep. Another beep also confirms a change of the surround sound setting of the N90Q: you can select between the standard, studio, and a surround variant.

The differences depend a lot on the music material, their effect ranging from “can kind of hear it” to “can totally hear it”.

We preferred the “studio” setting, which gave had the least “in-head” reproduction – the sound moved far to the left and right and a bit in front of the head. The volume can also be adjusted on the right side, and responsible for all these options is built-in digital signal processing, housing the algorithms for the calibration procedure, the surround effects and the noise-cancellation.

All these capabilities certainly give the user something to play with; but on the flip side, it’s only possible to master these headphones after spending some time reading the user manual. For instance, without the manual nobody would know that the sophisticated case also contains a charger to prepare the headphones for the next listening session after about 12 hours’ use.

Unfortunately, at the time of testing the manual was a mess, and apparently a work in progress. We will report on whether this promise was kept as soon as possible..

Weighing about 450 grams, the N90Q is relatively comfortable to wear, its ear-pieces being angled for a snugger fit, but

it doesn’t quite reach the standards of the AKG 812 in this respect. Even the soft, high-quality ear-cushions, made from resonance-absorbing memory foam, can’t change that – and they can’t be replaced.

A sound heavyweight

In terms of sound, the 90 series is beyond criticism. After the quick calibration – pressing the button for five seconds is enough – it develops a very neutral and dynamic sound, whether music is played in analogue through the conventional plug or in digital via the USB cable. The bass is tight and crisp and still swings, whether it’s of the synthetic Yello kind, or Ray Brown on the real double bass. Voices – Luciano Pavarotti, Terence Trent d’-Arby, or Suzanne Vega – come across without getting thick in the lower registers and without hissing in the upper frequencies.

In other words, these headphones are good for the long run (if perhaps a little heavy and expensive to wear while running). Verdict: a dream!

Michael Lang



▲ The ear pieces rotate to become flat with the headband, the golden button triggers the calibration, and above that is the on/off button – the noise cancelation is always on. The USB connection links the headphones to a computer.

AKG N90Q	
about € 1500, Weight: 450 g Guarantee: 2 years Contact: Harman, Phone: +49 7248/711132 http://us.akg.com	
Top class in terms of sound. Decent workmanship. The possibility of calibrating to the specific user is spectacular and unique. Despite their weight they are comfortable to wear.	
FEATURES	
Noise-cancellation, possibility to calibrate to user, sound regulator, volume regulator; three surround-sound programs; high efficiency with high impedance of 260 Ohm; diverse cables.	
STEREO-TEST	
SOUND QUALITY	91%
PRICE/PERFORMANCE	
★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆	
VERY GOOD	