

IN PERFECT BALANCE



Fully symmetric signal processing in a portable? And Pono's handy „High Resolution Audio Player“ has a few more tricks up its sleeve, too....

Neil Young's Pono initiative, a HD music portal plus his own audio player, is one of the most successful crowd-funding projects in the past years. Instead of the scheduled \$800,000, a proud \$6.8 million dollars was raised, and the promise to the private investors was met: as well as the distinctive Pono Player, the online music store went live at the beginning of the year – at least in the US. However, no deliveries are being made

to German IP addresses yet and there is no specific schedule for internationalization: all Pono will say is that „Additional countries will follow over the course of the year“.

The HD Pono Player is a different story, being sold via Amazon.com at a uniform global price of US\$ 399 and – like most current portables – being able to play music files in just about all formats and origin. Just three days after ordering

online, we received a stylish wooden box including HD player, Quick Start Guide, US plug adapter, and USB cable. We left the power adapter in the box since the portable can also be charged via the computer or a USB mobile phone charger.

Made for mobile?

At 126 g, the soft-touch coated Pono Player is indeed designed to be mobile. The triangular profile lets your hands cradle the player nicely, but admittedly makes it more difficult to put in shirt or pants pockets. It is operated via three keys and a touchscreen whose sensitivity we would rate „ok“: it generally reacts well, but especially when paging through the cover views we ended up in the wrong list a few times. However, since the menus are superbly organized, this didn't bother us too much: you cannot really „get lost“ here. The display rotates cleverly with the orientation of the portable, which makes it possible to use it as a mini desktop device.

The four output amps of the headphone **1** and line out **2** can be cascaded to create a balanced stereo output. In **3**, there is a blue LED which lights up whenever real Pono HD data are played: in Germany, this will stay off for the foreseeable future. ►

As delivered, our sample used a hopelessly outdated operating system, so our first act was to perform a system update, using the well-organized „PonoMusic World“ management software from www.ponomusic.com. The update ran independently and without us having to do anything. After restarting, our device was in Version 1.0.6 and now supported 32 bit audio files as well as DSD64 and 128.

Even more notable is the origin story of this Hi-Fi jewel: At Neil Young's behest, Ayre mastermind Charlie Hanson took care of the hardware. The contribution is hard to overlook, as the logo of the high-end company appears when the display starts up and, according to Pono, the D/A converters are derived from the out-of-this-world USB DAC QB-9 – definitely not the worst choice.

There are two outlets on the top of the portable: one for headphones, the other for analog line signals. In the menu you can combine the two outlets into a balanced output. In this way, you can connect to headphones or amps with clearly

KEYWORD

Balanced output:

The device processes audio signals in phase opposition on two separate signal paths. Later, the phase of one of the strands is flipped and summed with the other 'half'. This way any distortions added during the signal processing are cancelled out.

minimized hiss, although you do have to have to obtain the required adapters (the Pono outputs on 3.5mm stereo sockets) from third party providers. Oh, and you should connect the portable to the power adapter since balanced working cuts in half the battery life – and it's not great to begin with, at 6 - 8 hours.

Natural and fast

The Pono Player can't hide its highend genes: it sounds extraordinarily vibrant and dynamic, and very natural. Even the finest detail in the high frequencies can be heard, and the bass is so tight and crisp that, by comparison, that FiiO's outstanding X5 II sounds like it's running with its loudness function activated. In fact,



the Pono is so good it rewards the use of HD audio or DSD since the fine upper range comes out especially strongly with such files. As usual with portables, the sound depends on the headphones used but here, too, you can relax: both Sennheiser's Momentum M 2 and Pioneer's Master 1 were able to show what they could do with the Pono.

With its balanced character, the player leaves all competitors in its price class behind. We only hope we'll soon be able to try this jewel with music from the Pono shop. **Carsten Barnbeck**



The 64 GB internal storage can be expanded with Micro-SD cards of up to 128 GB. ►

PONO AUDIO PLAYER

Price: about € 350 (\$ 399)
 Colors: black, yellow
 Dimensions: 5 x 3 x 12.5 cm (WxHxD)
 Contact: www.ponomusic.com
 international distribution via
www.amazon.com

Solid workmanship, great operation, and superb sound – the Pono player sets standards in its price class.

EQUIPMENT

Features: HD portable with 24/192 converter and symmetric signal processing, 64 GB internal memory plus MicroSD card slot (max. 128 GB), interruption-free playback
Connections: USB (power, computer link), headphones out, analog line out
Sound formats: FLAC, ALAC, DSD, WAV, AIFF, AAC, MP 3

STEREO-TEST

SOUND QUALITY	85%
PRICE/PERFORMANCE	
★ ★ ★ ★ ☆	
EXCELLENT	