

## Dedicated Follower of Fashion

Leaving aside the sorry play-on-words of calling any changes in audio a "quiet revolution," we are in the midst of another phase in the ascent of headphones. I don't know if actual numbers exist, but I doubt anyone would contest the notion that currently, more people listen to music via headphones than speakers.



The upside is the spread of general privacy -- hence the "quiet revolution" suitability. Honestly, when were you last disturbed by some schmuck walking past with a boombox at full tilt?

What has emerged over the last two or three years, since Beats convinced the Great Unwashed that on- or over-ear headphones sound better than earbuds, is a new hierarchy at the highest end of the audio spectrum, while we're also seeing a raft of new contenders in the general headphone arena, say, sub-\$400.

For the former, we have witnessed a host of new brands, including Oppo, Audeze, oBravo and other young manufacturers that are challenging with vigor the traditional makers. While Sennheiser, Audio-Technica, Sony, Beyer, AKG, Grado, et al have no doubt enjoyed

fiscal rejuvenation thanks to the headphone renaissance, they no longer dominate the upper reaches of the headphone market the way they once did.



For the rest of the market, by which I mean Beats-priced competitors, from the sublime B&W P series to Grado, Sony, and the usual suspects, there are the unexpected newcomers. This odd phenomenon includes the emergence of the true "fashion" headphone from -- surprise, surprise -- actual famous-name fashion houses

When streetwise clothing brands saw how Beats turned headphones into accessories with the same appeal as trainers, scarves, baseball caps, T-shirts, and other paraphernalia, it was natural that they would append their logos to headphones. The results, though, are not merely badge-engineered cans but new designs made specifically for these companies.

I have yet to try the Paul Smith or Ted Baker headphones, but word on the street is that they "don't suck" and that these fashion brands are taking sound quality seriously. I also know of collaborations between traditional audio brands and long-established haute couture houses, watch manufacturers, supercar makers, and many others who want their own headphones. B&W with Maserati, Musical Fidelity with Vacheron Constantin, Monster and Adidas . . . this is a trend, not a fluke.

Amidst these, but undoubtedly aimed at those who want sound quality and cool, are the rather wonderful headphones from Master & Dynamic. They're Beats-priced, not Audeze-priced, and they manage to tick all of the boxes -- not least looking snazzy with their retro, almost steampunky hardware, nice finish, and tasty colour schemes. I was pleasantly surprised to hear how fine they sounded when fed by the Astell&Kern AK120 player, or via Quad's delightful PA-One headphone amp.

But while Master & Dynamic and B&W remain my headphones of choice in the real world, and Audeze and Oppo are my preferred brands for serious reviewing purposes or self-indulgent listening sessions, the anachrophile in me cannot resist stirring up some mild controversy. If the

fashion headphones are the "quiet revolution," then Stax headphones are certainly proof of the old "plus ça change . . ." mentality.

As I have had more headphones and headphone amplifiers to review in the past year than in the previous 25, it was only natural that I would compare them to (or in the case of the headphone amps, use them with) headphones of yore. Beyer DT 48s, Sennheiser HD 414s, Grado References -- these are all classic cans by any measure. But time and again, I returned to headphones that 1) cannot be used with/do

not need headphone amplifiers, and 2) represent how a once-dominant brand, a genuinely great brand, can miss a golden opportunity.

I'm talking about Stax, and this is turning into an open letter, a plea to the new owners, to get with the program. I have God-knows-how-old Gammas

and Sigmas that still massacre any headphone I can name, while the dinky little SR-001s remain the only in-ear headphones I would let past my lobes. With all Stax models, detail, transparency, imagery, openness, neutrality, and, yes, comfort are of an order yet to be bettered.

Stax does appear at hi-fi shows, the products are still available, and the company has survived. But it makes me think of Aston Martin or Maserati in the 1990s, before these companies were



rescued and relaunched with such success that they are producing more cars in a year than they manufactured in the previous 40. I wish that Stax could find its Dr. Ulrich Bez to return it to its rightful place as the originator of the true high-end headphone.

Whether or not Stax will rediscover its mojo, I don't know. Whatever optimism I retain in my dotage is restricted to anything except hi-fi, peace in the

Middle East, or a cure for baldness. But it's not too late for Stax. Unlike so many dormant brands, Stax has not passed its sell-by date. It is not a brand that shut its doors, or one that has been quiet for so long that it is only to be remembered by enthusiasts nearing their pensions. Like me.

So, no, I don't expect to see someone reviving brands like Superex, Rectilinear, Collaro, Ferrograph, Goldbug, Zeta, Fons or other blasts from the past. But Stax has never really disappeared. It merely needs some audio equivalent of Berocca. Or a can of Red Bull.

If the watch industry can revitalize near-dead brands with a better-than-80-percent success rate -- and they have revived some that were lifeless for more than a century -- what will it take for Stax to get its shit together? Its headphones

are astonishing, there's a hungry new market for deluxe cans, and it has the electrostatic thing sewn up. The brand is hi-fi's best-kept secret.



I absolutely adore Audeze headphones and the Oppos are terrific. These are Chateau Lafite or Cheval Blanc. They are about as good as it gets, and my (hi-fi) life would be diminished without them.

But Stax is special. It is Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. Rare, costly, memorable,

maybe even for special occasions. And you all deserve a bottle. Or at least the opportunity to taste it.

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