

STAX Ear Speaker systems

Your Own Little Audio Legend.

There are a few legendary audio components that really do justify their reputation - Sonus faber loudspeakers, Audio Research amplification and Quad's Electrostatic speakers are obvious stand outs. The best anyone else can claim is that their products are almost as good.

In the world of headphones it's the Japanese company **Stax with their Electrostatic Ear Speaker systems**. It has been this way for around 40 years and while lots of other headphone brands come and go, it is Stax who still set the standard. We used to sell Stax, but somehow fell from the path, having been diverted by price and the lure of the new. I knew something was missing...



So, prompted by some fortuitous news, a few weeks ago we got some new Stax Earspeakers in and I'm suddenly wondering why we ever drifted away. But first - I want to dispel the biggest preconception.

Stax are unaffordable? A new Stax system - Ear Speakers and amplifier are around the

same price as a new iPhone. And when you factor in the cost of a separate headphone amp which is now close to mandatory for any comparably priced headphones, Stax are looking like the real value for money option. **We've got complete Stax systems from around NZ\$1100**

Yes - there are absolutely some Stax models that cost as much as a middling amplifier and speaker system, but these days that are by no means alone. What makes Stax unique is how long they have been at this game and how they are able to leverage off this experience to deliver stunning sound even at their entry level.

Why Electrostatic?

Any Quad owner will be able to answer this one for you. Electrostatic speakers sound like no other - the operating principle and construction is completely different from normal speakers. There are no magnets, no wire coils and no box. The distortion levels are dramatically lower,

the response faster and more detailed yet more relaxed and transparent. The Stax are a real electrostatic - not a so called planar design which is just a fudge.

Anyone who has heard a well set up electrostatic panel speaker will know all about the sound quality delivered - they energise the room and have a seamless top to bottom sound with remarkable sound staging and scale. The level of detail is only limited by the source components yet the top end is never forced or shrill. Vocals and strings are rendered with uncanny accuracy. Very few dynamic (box) speakers can come close to imitating the qualities of electrostatic speakers and most can sound completely wrong headed in a direct comparison.

If there are some limits to what electrostatic speakers can do - they are generally less efficient than box speakers and so don't go as loud. Boy racer bass is not really on the menu. The electronics within the speaker are quite high voltage and so a large part of the speaker design and cost is devoted to this. And while you get what you pay for, the entry level to real electrostatic speakers is simply out of reach for many people.

This is where Stax are so brilliant - **not only to they give you all of the sonic benefits of electrostatic speakers, they also address the limitations of the full sized speakers** in several important ways.

Being headphones - or more correctly ear speakers, the sound they deliver is independent of the room - so no matter where you choose to listen you'll enjoy the same fantastic sound. The proximity of the electrostatic panel to your ears also means higher sound levels and better bass - the frequency response of even the entry level Stax system is an astonishing 7 - 4,1000Hz.

A smaller panel, which could fit in the palm of your hand is easier to power so the support electronics are lower voltage and we can concentrate on quality rather than quantity. Finally,



the tolerances and clearances involved are much finer, allowing the small panel to be engineered with a precision that's much harder to achieve on a larger scale.

The Ear speaker nomenclature makes so much sense now - these really are small speakers that lightly sit on your head. As opposed to headphones that inject

sound in. This results in a far more relaxing and realistic presentation on music - you can listen to the Stax for as long as you want without fatigue. Sound staging is in a class of its own - once you listen you'll understand! Because the sound is produced by ultra thin, light panels, the logic behind construction is just to position these is a way that would mimic a full sized set of electrostatic speakers in your room. The open design is comfortable and breathes.

So let's have a closer look at the newest - and one of the most affordable models in the Stax range - the SRS-3100 system. This is the new SR-L300 'Lambda' ear speaker (NZ\$780) combined with the proven SRM-252S driver (\$800) (think of it as a headphone amplifier at this stage) give you a matched system for NZ\$1500. This is directly comparable to a mid range set of Grados or Sennheisers tied to a reasonable headphone amplifier, which may, or may not, be an ideal match.

The SR-L300 is an evolutionary design going right back to the original Lambdas, and at each step materials and engineering have been improved to deliver an even better performance - the electrostatic membrane, stainless steel photo etched electrodes, OFC connecting cable and smoothly sliding headband. All these improvements are derived directly from more costly models.

While specification only ever tells part of the story, you don't have to have a Phd to understand that the frequency response we have already mentioned of 7 – 41,000Hz is pretty special. (in direct comparison the latest Grado RS-2e, which retail at around the same price in NZ, specify a 14 - 28,000 response)

Then factor in the difference between electrostatic and conventional design - the electrostatic panel is far lighter than the cone and could assembly used in almost every other headphone so it can stop and start more quickly. It is driven over the whole surface rather than pushed from the centre so doesn't flex. All the issues that dog conventional speakers are replicated in conventional headphones.

The open backed design which avoids the boxy closed in sound of many headphones - again this replicates the difference between electrostatic and conventional box speakers. While there



might be factors that drive people to box speakers over panels, these are largely negated in headphones - the Stax do most certainly deliver bass, ample sound levels and are directly comparable in cost - and it's our contention that they simply sound better when you compare apples with apples.

There are some things that you

can't do with your Stax - the running machine at the gym is not the place for them. The open back design means there will be some sound leakage both in and out so either listening in really noisy environments, or conversely next to someone else in a very quiet setting. Of course we can address all these issues with our other options - the NuForce in-ear models for music on the go and the brilliant Sonus faber Prymas which are perfect for both travel and home use.

About the Driver Units.

A electrostatic panel requires power to work - they operate on relatively high voltages but very low current so are almost the opposite of a conventional speaker. So with the Stax, the connecting cable carries not only the musical signal, but also the engaging voltage for the panels. You'll see that the connecting plug has multiple pins for this which correspond to the socket on front of the driver.

In reality, the Driver Units function in exactly the same way as any quality headphone amplifier and as you go up the food chain, you'll gain features such as balanced inputs, the ability to connect two pairs of ears speakers and most importantly, there are significant improvements in sound quality.

You can connect any line level source to the Driver Units - a nice DAC, phono stage, iPhone or any of the new generation of high resolution personal players such as the new Questyle QP1-R. There are also outputs so the Driver Unit can be in-line between any two components simplifying your set up.

You'll be able to concentrate on the quality of any associated source components rather than worrying about stuff like wattage and speaker positioning and room response. You'll have no neighbour issues and quite possibly a more harmonious domestic arrangement.

On a personal level I've found that Stax have done wonderful things to compensate for a bit of age induced hearing loss - you may well find that you have become more sensitive to distortion and it's better to be able to listen at lower levels - Stax system have knack of delivering remarkable detail without having to be ramped up. I can literally hear things now on recordings that I have grown up with that I never heard at the time I got them!

For those that know me you'll also understand that my listening tastes verge on the acidic. While Stax might be marketed to classical and jazz oriented listeners, I'm at my happiest with music ranging around Sonic Youth, Nick Cave and cool new little Dunedin bands - the Stax do wonderful things on this front too - it doesn't have to be hi-res or easy listening - the Stax will bite when you want them to, but there are no points for damaging your hearing with headphones and Stax are not about this.

In many ways, Stax are an antidote to conventional hifi - you can get straight into the serious high end at a fraction of the price of a decent pair of speakers. And after many years of selling

all sorts of headphones, we've come full circle back to Stax, found them markedly improved and simply better than anything else we have listened to.

Here's our selection of the most affordable options for you to consider - come and have a listen, or if you are out of town, talk to us about getting a set at home to try.

Our (re)Introductory special

STAX SRS-2170 system - SR-207 Ear Speaker and SRM-252S Driver Unit NZ\$1100 including GST.

STAX SRS-3100 system - new SRL300 Ear Speaker and SRM-252S Driver \$1500

STAX SR-L500 Ear Speaker \$1250

STAX 353X Driver Unit \$1900

Still want more? A few reviews...

"The first thing you notice when you listen to Stax earspeakers is the space they give, the Stax sound is an airy and musical sound. It kind of feels like the band is dangling on strings beside your ears." Adairacoustic

"The presentation of the SR-207s is uniquely airy, open, detailed and stunning in its portrayal of the soundstage, which was as close to in front of us as we've ever had headphones deliver."
AVhub

"Look no further. These earspeakers will mark the end of any upgraditis you maybe experiencing.

I literally can't describe how amazing these headphones sound like, you just have to audition them. However note, there is a break in time of 15-20 hours, sound quality drastically changes."

"The Stax SR-207 electrostatic headphones don't sound like other headphones. They're more open, so the sound is less stuck between my ears. Listen to a pair of SR-207s for even just a few minutes, and when you switch over to AKG, Grado or Sennheiser headphones they'll sound "canned." The SR-207s' unforced presentation really comes into its own with well-recorded acoustic music, which sounds more acoustic, warmer, sweeter and more natural over the SR-207s than my best dynamic headphones." Cnet

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