

Stax SR-009 Electrostatic Headphone system by Chris Martens

As we move into the second decade of the 21st century, it seems apparent that not only is traditional high-end audio thriving, but there has also sprung up an alternate, parallel high-end audio universe whose music-loving citizens have chosen to focus on headphone and earphone-based audio systems. We at Hi-Fi+ have, in sharp contrast to some highbrow audio publications, embraced this brave new high-end world in a wholehearted way. Naturally, this means we have got a whole new world of equipment to explore, new benchmark products to evaluate, and new ways and means of listening.

I suppose each of us, in his or her own way, wonders from time to time what the very best product in any given class of audio component might be—especially if we throw caution to the winds, forget about pricing, pull out all the stops, and look for products that, in the truest sense of the phrase, represent the state of the art.

In the top-tier headphone realm, I've found a product I believe represents the state of the art in the here and now, and that points the way toward even greater things headed our way in the future. That product is the Stax SR-009 Electrostatic Headphone. Let's begin by acknowledging that the Stax is very expensive; in the US (my home country) the SR-009 sells for a staggering \$5,250, making it by far the most costly headphone currently available. What is more, the Stax cannot be run from a conventional headphone amplifier, but rather requires a dedicated electrostatic amplifier (or in Stax parlance, a "headphone energiser"). Somewhat dauntingly, most of the dedicated amps thought to be best for use with the Stax 'phones are apt to cost roughly as much (or even more) than the headphones themselves. Can a \$10,000+ headphone system possibly make sense? You need only to spend about five minutes listening to a good SR-009-based system to be able to answer this question with a resounding, "Yes," and here's why.

At its best, the SR-009 might arguably be the most transparent, most resolving, most focused, and most well balanced audio transducer on the planet. If you happen to love fine electrostatic loudspeakers, which I do, yet have been disappointed by their limitations in terms of dynamics and/or low-frequency extension, then hearing the Stax in action may well prove to be a revelation for you. In essence, you get all the light, lithe, fast, finely resolved sound you could ever want from an electrostat, but with powerful low bass that effortlessly extends down to 20Hz, plus downright breathtaking dynamics that no full-range electrostatic loudspeaker could ever hope to match. The result is downright amazing.

Is listening to the Stax SR-009 actually more rewarding than listening to top-tier loudspeakers? I would say the experiences are comparable, but different. Loudspeakers will always enjoy a certain edge in terms of realistic 3D soundstaging and imaging, but conversely you will have to spend the proverbial "king's ransom" in order to find a loudspeaker system that will have even a prayer of keeping up with the blazing transient speed, transparency, and focus of the Stax. One point to be aware of, though, is that the Stax has very little sound of its own, so that it behaves much like a sonic chameleon, reflecting the various tonal colours and characteristics of the components used to drive it.

What unique sonic joys does the Stax SR-009 bring to the party? Well, if you are the sort of listener who, down deep, wishes to access every last minute bit of sonic information that passed through the record producer's mastering console, then your transducer of choice has most definitely arrived. In fact, as you listen carefully to your favourite records through the SR-009, you may come away with the impression (quite possibly an accurate one) that you now know even more about the inner workings of the records than the producers did. How cool is that?

