



Stax SRS-5100

As we saw with the Stax winner on p57, there's more to a Stax 'earspeaker' (as they prefer to label their unique electrostatic designs) than just the headphone itself.

They require a specific driver amplifier for their unique requirements and proprietary cable connection, so Stax produces a range of driver units — indeed these provide an upgrade path for Stax owners.

But rather than give the new customer a double decision, Stax also offer complete systems in a single purchase. So this SRS-5100 comprises the SR-L500 earspeakers and the SRM-353X driver unit for \$2999 all up, only \$500 more than the price of the SR-L700 alone.



Audio Marketing's Nigel Macara addresses our Awards audience and collects the Stax award.

The SRS-5100 combo is a lower level, then, but you still get a large dose of the delights that Stax designs bring to music. These are electrostatic headphones that are entirely open — the thin-film diaphragms within their tough fixed electrodes send as much sound outwards as they do towards your ears, so these are not designs to choose for listening in a communal area. The 'L' in the model number references the company's famous Lambda designs that won Stax such acclaim in the 1980s and 1990s; though the company is under new ownership these days the Lambda series continues, and the SR-L500s are from a new generation with a redesigned enclosure. Their pads are comfortable artificial leather and the 10-stop headband adjustment keeps the 1.5kg weight of the earspeakers barely noticeable in use. The hinge to the headshells always looks worryingly plastic to us, but we gather reliability is high.

The SRM-353X amp driver is very deep but with quite a petite frontage, dominated by that glorious two-section knob, beautifully weighted for twiddling.

At the rear it offers two balanced XLR inputs, one RCA input pair, and an RCA loop-through output, handy to chain the signal on to somewhere else.

When you audition Stax headphones, you're likely to be immediately impressed by the details first, the glorious accuracy of soundstaging. It's only later than you appreciate the quality of their bass handling — present without being in your face, never bloated nor puffy nor dominant. If these SR-L500s aren't ultimately as gobsmackingly thrilling as the highest of Stax earspeakers, they retain the bewitching airiness of delivery, and they image orchestral and natural recordings particularly well. Jack White's acoustic album was thrillingly served, from the tape hiss of 'Love Interruption' to the pluck and tap of the ping-pong mixed bluegrass version of 'Top Yourself'. As a complete amp/headphone solution, the SRS-5100 combo needs recognition outside our normal price-breaks, and so it is our Headphone (or Earspeaker) System of the Year. More info: www.audiomarketing.com.au