



For your ears only

Audiolab enters the in-ear headphone market supported by serious knowhow. **Ed Selley** enjoys a concert for one

As rises go, the elevation of in-ear headphones as listening device of last resort to a serious and competitive medium has been brief but meteoric. A little over a decade ago, I was considered 'a bit weird' for spending £80 on a pair, whereas now to earn the same soubriquet I'd probably need to spend 10 times that. This hasn't gone unnoticed by various companies and there has been no shortage of new arrivals in the market. Audiolab is the latest to make an appearance with two models of which the 2D is the more affordable.

The nature of in-ear headphone design is extremely specific, though, and creating a model from scratch is neither easy nor cheap. With no prior experience in this category, Audiolab could have ended up with a rather pricey white elephant. With this in mind, it decided to team up with specialist ACS to develop its M-EAR models. Best known for its custom-fit designs that are extremely popular in professional audio circles, ACS has the background and knowledge required to design and build a competitive design.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the M-EAR shares a number of design features

with ACS' in-ear headphones. Both models use Knowles balanced armatures – two in the 2D and four in the more expensive 4D version. These are arranged in a fashion that is called SSI (Sound Stage Imaging) and uses the placement of the drivers to broaden the stereo image and increase the sense of air and space to the performance.

No less important is a process called IRIS (Intelligent Resonance in

A sense of speed, bite and fun make it a compelling partner to spend time with

Silicone), which is intended to take full advantage of the strengths of balanced armature drivers while minimising the weaknesses. The shape and internal profile of the in-ear is designed so that the user benefits from the detail and high frequency extension that armatures excel at while ensuring that the midrange and bass extension is able to match it, avoiding the need to 'bolster' the armature with a dynamic driver as some rivals do.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audiolab M-EAR 2D
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
In-ear headphone
WEIGHT
20g
FEATURES
• 2x balanced Knowles armatures
• 1.45m detachable cable with in-line mic
• Fabric carry case
DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Group Ltd.
TELEPHONE
01480 452561
WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk

The 2D makes use of a combination of memory foam-style bungs and a structured over-ear arrangement for the wiring. This combination ensures that the M-EAR 2D is unlikely to go anywhere once correctly inserted into the ear canal. I am not a huge fan of foam tips and generally prefer silicone where available (they are not in this case), but the sizes supplied give a useful spread of fitment options and I find them to be reasonably comfortable in use. The bendy jacket for the ear fitting feels a little unyielding, but works well enough and goes some way to offsetting the fact that the woven-type cable that comes supplied is fairly heavy. It is detachable, though, and comes fitted with a microphone for taking calls.

The overall standard of build is excellent with the M-EAR 2D neatly straddling a sense of bullet proof and pro audio ruggedness with enough quality to the finish to make you feel you've bought something that is commensurate with the asking price. The design is subtle and not overly festooned with branding, while the gloss finish is smart without being gaudy or attracting unwanted attention. This is further helped by the inclusion of a decent case that is large enough to comfortably accommodate the in-ears and still fit into a large pocket.

Sound quality

Having left the M-EAR 2D to run in for two days before any serious listening takes place, the first thing that is clear is that even judged by the standards of other balanced armature designs, this is an exceptionally sensitive in-ear design. Used via the 3.5mm output of a Chord Electronics Hugo 2 headphone amp/DAC (HFC 428), the volume barely needs to be engaged to hit a reasonable volume level and is deafening before the 25

percent level, making this a fine potential partner for smartphones.

The good news is that the virtues of the Audiolab extend beyond sensitivity. Listening to *There Is No Love Under Fluorescent Light* by Stars suggests that the efforts that have gone into creating the sense of space and three dimensionality have been very successful. The sweeping scale of *Losing To You* is reproduced in a manner that extends well beyond the natural end of the ear canal. After a minute or so, you find yourself dialling into the presentation and moving away from the sense that the sound is solely to the left and right of your head.

Equally important is that there is no perceivable handover between the two drivers used on either side. The only clue to the crossover arrangement is that one armature is given over to bass and simple listening isn't sufficient to work out at what frequency that happens. The 24/96 download of Max Richter's re-working of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* feels cohesive and has plenty of low-end shove that integrates well with the upper registers. This is a more traditional area of strength for armature models and there is plenty of detail coupled with very reasonable tonality. The strings have enough differentiation to sound like many instruments rather than a single ill-defined mass.

Some care needs to be taken with partnering the Audiolab, however. As noted, power isn't going to be too much of a deciding factor in what you use, but source equipment with any element of forwardness to it has



The M-EAR 2D faces stiff competition in the shape of the Audeze iSINE 10 (HFC 423), which – thanks to its planar magnetic driver – uses a different method to achieve the same spaciousness and integration that the Audiolab excels at. Where the 2D has a clear upper hand against the Audeze is the overall sensitivity. It can be used with devices that will struggle to get the iSINE 10 to a reasonable listening level. It is also more discrete aesthetically. Where the iSINE 10 excels is the deeper and more powerful bass response, more refined top end and the superb Lightning cable implementation for use with iDevices.



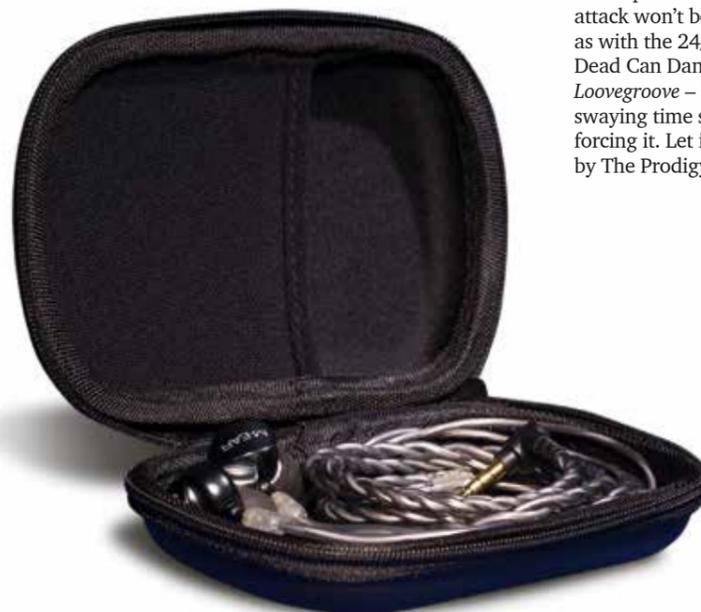
to be handled carefully. My Sony XA1 phone has no trouble hitting pretty much any level I might want to listen at, but – lacking some of the top-end refinement of the Hugo 2 – it can sound a little edgy with some material, something that is further exacerbated if you move from streaming services like Tidal to low data options. The presentation never truly escapes that of its warts-and-all professional cousin, but with a little care it shouldn't be an issue.

It is worth indulging the M-EAR, though, because building on that well-implemented integration between the drivers is a sense of speed, bite and most importantly fun that make it a very compelling partner to spend time with. The clever part is that where outright attack won't benefit the music – such as with the 24/88.2 download of Dead Can Dance's *The Ubiquitous Mr Loovegroove* – it captures the oddly swaying time signature well without forcing it. Let it loose with *Their Law* by The Prodigy and the Audiolab is

massively entertaining. The transient speed combined with that impressive sense of scale really allows the track to shine. With even moderately talented supporting electronics, the M-EAR 2D should be enough to have you moving with the music whether you set out to or not.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important consideration of the M-EAR is that it doesn't feel like a 'me too' product. There is even an element of the more traditional Audiolab electronics to the way that it goes about making music that means if you like what the company does, this will almost certainly appeal as well. The manner in which it delivers music and engages the listener is consistently appealing and when you combine this with the acceptable levels of comfort, very impressive sensitivity, decent selection of accessories and a high standard of build, you have a very creditable new arrival in the sub-£500 in-ear headphone segment ●



The M-EAR 2D comes with this practical fabric carry case

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Spacious and lively sound; useful sensitivity; build
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Can be slightly ruthless; minor comfort quibbles
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A very capable in-ear that delivers a consistently good performance at an attractive price
FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL

