



Accurate reporting

This \$1999 headphone may be designed to look like an oldie, but it's a 21st century goldie inside.

Klipsch Heritage HP3
headphones

We felt privileged just to be breaking the golden seal and unclasping the leather straps that held these remarkable Klipsch headphones within their triple layers of packaging, let alone getting to live with the product for an extended review period. While headphones at this price are no longer quite the rarity they were a decade ago, it's nevertheless fascinating to see a mainstream manufacturer deliver a statement headphone atop what is now an extensive range of Klipsch headgear covering every niche from sporting earbud to luxury home headphone.

The HP-3 design bears Klipsch's 'Heritage' tag, which has been used for a range of products that hark back in exterior design to the golden age of radio and the very earliest days of audio equipment, and the HP3s continue those design cues with deep bronze highlights, real hand-sanded wood headshells (a deep dark red ebony

on our review pair; lighter walnut and oak woods are available). And we like the American straight-talking in the descriptions — that's 'sheepskin' on the angled earpads rather than some exotic vole vellum, and that's solid 'stitched cowhide' on the headband, thank you very much. Yet they also look thoroughly contemporary, in the same way that a company like Grado maintains modern design that includes heritage from earlier days. For good measure the Klipsch packaging is thoroughly 'Heritaged' with a luxurious solid wooden inner box of sliding compartments, and its generous inclusion in a lower drawer of a black steel-rod stand (pictured) on which your headgear can proudly perch.

But if the Heritage elements face the past, the internal technology is more futuristic, and of particular note is their low impedance and high sensitivity, which allows them to deliver sufficient levels from a smartphone, where many open home headphones require a dedicated headphone

amplifier of quality to do much at all, let alone their best. Mind you, if you are indeed in the market for a headphone amplifier/DAC, Klipsch has released a \$799 model to complement the HP3s, and it looks to have the most lust-worthy expression of Heritage style yet (it's pictured above in the background). But we did not have it for this review.

The HP3's sensitivity is achieved by coupling oversized (52mm) 'biodynamic' drivers together with enough magnetic power to deliver more than one tesla of flux density. 'Biodynamic' appears to refer to the material used for the driver, this being "a proprietary mixture of biocellulose and inorganic fiber", while surrounds of urethane rubber grant the driver still further rigidity in what Klipsch calls a 'Free Edge' design, something we've seen previously on Denon designs.

Given all that flux density, and the quoted weight of 440g, it's a surprise to find the HP3 feeling solid but not overly heavy in the hand, and even lighter when on the head where it balances so well that comfort was never an issue, no matter how long the listening session. They are also light on isolation, since their semi-open design keeps the outside world audible, merely skimmed of its top frequencies. The corollary is, of course, that they also spill sound, requiring privacy for listening. Indeed the drivers here are both open to the outside and also ported through the baffle inside the earcup using a vent positioned slightly behind the firing line of the driver; Klipsch reckons this helps prevent pressure build-up and delivers an even more relaxed listen.

They come with two cables, one ending in a full-size quarter-inch jack (though this turns out actually to be a neat-fitting minijack adaptor), the other at the usual length for portable use, though with a decidedly superior gold-stripped braid. Both cables split at a central toggle into twin unbraided cables (there are no smart controls on the portable cable) ending in twin miniplugs which connect to either headset. They don't lock into place, but sit solidly enough.

Performance

With rigid drivers, able to breathe without chamber compression, in a high sensitivity system, the HP3 proved a delight for both detail and dynamics.

In simple delicate recordings they opened up every details. Benny Andersson's gentle 'Piano' album of 2017 was recorded on an island studio in Stockholm, and while Benny might not stand accused of delivering Lisztian dynamic drama, the Klipsch headphones revealed the small room acoustic around Benny's quietly expressive performance, how his pedal pumps away through *Chess*, how he taps the woodwork when his right hand is momentarily unemployed, even scratching a microphone 20 seconds out from the end of *Thank You For The Music* — the HP3s put it all out there with their detailed delivery of this 24/96 DG release.

And it's all out there very much *au naturel* indeed. There's no undue emphasis, the HP3s sound exceedingly flat in terms of perceived response, while delivering both sensorially solid bass and seemingly sky-less and open top frequencies. All those recordings with tinkly bells came out, and we were much melted under the Klipsch's gift of revelation in imaging the individual roles inside the rising tide of Arvo Part's *Cantus In Memory Of Benjamin Britten For Strings & Bells* (the



'Fratres' Hungarian version, not the wobbly 'Tabular Rasa' Stuttgart recording). The gradual growth in density of this recording showed a great strength here — that no matter how high the climax might rise, the HP3s didn't fail us. They had our brain in deep resonance by the end of the *Cantus*, such is its thrumming climax, and they stayed sharp and focused to the top of the glass, without the slightest indication of distress. We wouldn't want to listen any louder than we reached with the HP3s; they were bombproof in that regard.

The tightness of delivery was often of planar or electrostatic quality in its speed, but with the additional solidity of a dynamic driver. They gave the stick bass and kick drums on Peter Gabriel and Laurie Anderson's *This Is the Picture (Excellent Birds)* a truly remarkable click and percussive edge yet full with bass solidity and impact at the same time. There was a similar combination of timing and weight behind the massively recorded drum through Boy & Bear's *Rabbit Song*.

No matter the level, the headphones impressed. They still delivered detail when

at lower volumes, then reached the usual point at which they sounded simply real... but from there you could continue feeding them more from a high quality headphone source, keep turning them up, larger than than life, because distortion was so very low.

We enjoyed vinyl this way, and the headphones continued their series of hits — they delivered a thrillingly massive open bottom E from the bass of The Slits' wonderful take on *Heard It (Through The Grapevine)* while Ari Up's wild vocal danced above the massed harmonised hums and a truly tappy tone to the middle-eight conga. And they seemed to be getting better with every listening session.

This realism of delivery was equally effective when listening to spoken word audiobooks and radio, with a very natural weight behind all voices, and a proper differentiation of tone between microphone types. Of course this level of clarity also reveals limitations in the compression of online radio delivery, especially for higher frequencies. Most definitely not the fault of the HP3s, which just reported accurately on whatever they were given.

Conclusion

This price bracket isn't quite the exclusive zone it used to be, and this level of funds allows you to investigate entirely different breeds of head-fi — flat diaphragms, dedicated driver amplifiers, exotic materials. The Klipsch HP3s are relatively conventional, but succeed through a large driver, powerful magnetism and high-end materials. Their friendly impedance gives

them a useful advantage in working solidly with portable devices (being open, they're not for the commute or office, however). Best of all, given a high quality headphone amp they deliver deliciously detailed yet scaleable sound quality that justifies their appearance in such elevated echelons as these. They may look like an oldie, but they're a goldie too. — JF

SPECS

Klipsch Heritage HP3 \$1999

Type: semi-open, over-ear, dynamic

Driver: 52mm Biodynamic Free Edge

Impedance: 25 ohms

Sensitivity: 98dB (1mW)

Quoted frequency response: 5Hz-45kHz

Wood options: Ebony (reviewed), Walnut, Oak

Weight: 440g

Dimensions (whd): 200 x 260 x 50mm

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