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The Audeze LCDi4

Best of the Best

By Jeff Dorgay

I must admit, for those of you new to our readership, I'm not a headphone guy. But like the World's Most Interesting Man, when I do listen to headphones, I listen to Audeze. My journey began with their original LCD-2s, that for me turned my world around and adjusted my attitude. These were finally some headphones that sounded like a great pair of speakers. And they had bass; real bass. Though you'll never get that punch you in the gut" feel, produced by a big pair of speakers. The extended, defined bass response of the Audeze phones is tough to ignore.

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As much as I do not like headphones, on a boat or a goat, I like in-ear phones even less. Other than the \$4,000 Stereo Pravda's which is my current favorite, IEMs have been pretty disappointing.

Doing some background reading on the LCDi4 headphones you see here; I noticed that Audeze works with Designworks, who just happen to work with BMW (and I'm a big fan of BMW) and they also have a financing option for the \$2,495 LCDi4s that shakes out to \$220 a month. I'm paying less than that to lease my new BMW i3. That there were high expectations going in, would be putting it mildly.

Minor grousing

While the LCDi4s come in a lovely, luxurious case, the USB stick owners' manual doesn't clearly explain to someone uninitiated with headphones just how to use those damn ear things, that help hold these relatively large IEMs on your ears. The cable supplied looks to be of high quality, but it's way too short and presumptuous that you'd want to use headphones this awesome (letting the cat out of the bag here) only with an amplifier limited to a mini jack output. A quick video would be helpful, and for \$2,495, a 1/8" to 1/4" adapter should be in the box, along with another six feet of cable.

Resisting the urge to sneak a quick listen during the break-in period, the LCDi4s were plugged into an iPhone 5 and looped on a long Tidal playlist to make sure they were broken in. Rustling a proper adapter out of the toolbox, serious listening began in earnest with the Pass HPA-1, the PrimaLuna HP Integrated and a freshly re-capped Marantz 2245 just for giggles. *(continued)*

Beep beep, yeah!

The best part of my job is when, after nearly 40 years of being a hi-fi enthusiast and the last 15 listening for a living, is to have my world turned upside down completely. The Audeze LCDi4s are worth every penny asked. Where my other favorites, the Stereo Pravda phones sound like someone put my Focal Sopra no.3s in a shrink machine, the LCDi4s sound like someone put a brand new pair of original Quad 57s and put them in a shrink machine, so you can insert them in your ears. Should you have the chance to audition these phones, make sure you are relaxed, centered and in your happy place. Make sure they are plugged into a fantastic source and headphone amplifier too. Yes, they sound good with a laptop, phone, pad or modest amp, but if you want to fully experience what the LCDi4s are capable of, they need an exceptional source.

These phones are the pinnacle of personal listening. If you have a mega two channel hi-fi system that you'd like to take with you wherever you go, the Audeze LCDi4 phones are your ticket to ride. The key word is refinement. These phones offer refinement across the entire audio spectrum that is unmatched anywhere else in the world of portable listening. These phones offer a level of refinement I've only heard through few great two channel systems. *(continued)*

The new 800 Series Diamond didn't get better by chance. It got better by change. 868 changes to be precise.

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Where so many headphones produce an overblown, overextended sonic field between your ears, which usually has way too much sonic contrast and saturation, the LCDi4s merely unfold the music as a great two channel system does. Imaging is spot on, and eyes closed, if not for the lack of pants rattling that goes with speakers, the spatial relationships are correct, feeling like there are a pair of large, high-quality speakers in front of me. The longer I listen, the more I swear I hear stuff bounce off the walls in my listening room, but I'm not.

The level of minute detail revealed by the LCDi4s is so enthralling, you will be going back to your favorite recordings to give your ears a tune up. Should you not have a mega two channel system to listen to sans phones, the LCDi4s will open up a new world of listening pleasure. Think of them as a six figure hi-fi system that fits in your pocket.

Further listening

While numerous examples of tracks can be listed, the key here is that music sounds correct through the LCDi4s. Tonal, dynamic and spatial cues are so good, within 15 seconds of listening, you completely forget you are listening to headphones. The level of distortion is so low, as it is in a great planar magnetic or ESL speaker, whether you are listening to acoustic instruments, vocalists or crunchy guitars through a wall of Marshall amps, it sounds like music, not like music through electronics, scrunched into some tiny earpieces. This is the way music sounds through a great hifi system.

You simply must hear these to believe them. If like me, the only thing that's put you off about your full sized, over ear Audeze phones is their size and weight, this is the variation on the theme you've been waiting for. Much as I love my LCD-2s, I can only keep those big things on my head for so long. Good as they are, they still lack the ultimate level of refinement and transparency that the LCDi4 does.

Like a pair of fine loudspeakers, the better your system, the better the LCDi4s will render your music collection. Jacked into my reference system, they were not out of place using the dCS Rossini DAC and clock for digital tracks and the Grand Prix Audio Monaco 2.0 turntable we recently reviewed, via the Pass XS Phono. Channeling nearly \$150,000 worth of source components through the Pass HPA-1 is a visceral experience, to say the least.

Trying to be level headed

The Audeze LCDi4s might not be the beginning of your personal audio journey, but they can certainly be the end. Offering such a high degree of tonal neutrality and dynamic range, they can also make for an incredible reference by which to judge any other components you might consider adding or upgrading.

These are certainly this headphone curmudgeon's favorite headphones, by a considerable margin. Be ready to plunk down your credit card. You won't be able to un-experience these. The LCDi4s are crazy money, but they are crazy good. Consider yourself warned! ●

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