

A good **headphone amplifier** should be an essential part of your set-up if you want to get the very best from your prized cans. We take a look at four premium amps that are ideal for use with headphones from £70 upwards

Test Express

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS £200-£250

Get more from your 'phones

Creek OBH-21SE



£245

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF the Creek OBH-21SE are good: it feels well-made and solid with a clear blue LED light to let you know it's on. It's also the only amplifier here to feature a handy, rear-mounted on/off push button – all the others on test become active from the moment they're plugged in. Mounted on the front are two headphone inputs and a weighty volume control. Creek, like the other manufacturers here, also supplies a 12vDC power supply with the amplifier.

In use it serves up a spacious sound with a good tonal balance. The midrange is pleasantly smooth, with vocals possessing a nice sense of warmth. Bass and treble also sit well together, while detailing is more than capable.

What you get with the Creek is a relaxing, pleasant listen. It's a very likeable amplifier, but it needs more verve to really shine. Other amps are more insightful when handling music, and have the extra bite the Creek needs to give it that additional edge. You should audition this – especially if you prefer a safer sound – but we think it could do with a bit more punch.

↑ FOR
Good tonal qualities, pleasant listen, on/off button, well built

↓ AGAINST
Needs more punch

→ VERDICT
It's perfectly pleasant but we'd like more bite



Graham Slee Novo



£235

WE FIRST TESTED the stylish little Novo back in January and loved it. Aesthetic simplicity seems to be the theme, with the Novo packing one volume control and one headphone input only.

After settling down from a bright sound during its running in, the Novo gives the listener a well-balanced audio with a crisp, clear treble that's quite brightly lit but holds no hint of stridency, a warm midrange that enhances emotion in music, and a springy, active bass that's well-formed and underpins everything nicely.

You are served great levels of detail here and production subtleties are handled excellently, even those mixed deep within the music. In terms of dynamics, this feisty Novo can handle just about anything you can throw at it. Add a good sense of timing and essentially you've got everything you need in a headphone amplifier.

What really stands out for us is that it's such an involving listen – you can't help getting into whatever it's serving up. It's worth bearing in mind that it's £15 less than the Lehmann too, while doing much of the same right. OK, it's slightly less flexible than the other amplifiers here in terms of its features, but with a sound as good as this, you're not going to mind.

↑ FOR
Good with dynamics, tonally accomplished, great detailing, ease of use

↓ AGAINST
Needs a lengthy running-in period

→ VERDICT
The Novo is an involving and addictive listen



FACTS AND FIGURES

PRICE RANGE £200-£250	CREEK OBH-21SE	GRAHAM SLEE NOVO	LEHMANN RHINELANDER	PRO-JECT HEADBOX SEII
SPECIFICATION				
PRICE	£ 245	£ 235	£ 250	£ 200
POWER (MW)	100	50	160	70
LINE LEVEL IN	2	2	2	2
FINISHES	1	1	1	1
DIMENSIONS (hwd, mm)	66x100x150	50x110x110	47x110x135	72x103x151
VERDICT	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★

WHY DO YOU NEED A HEADPHONE AMP?

NOT ALL AMPLIFIERS or sources are fitted with headphone outputs. On those that are, the headphone amplifier section is usually little more than an afterthought.

Don't think this kind of cost cutting is restricted to budget kit. Most high-end products with such an output don't sound too good either. Optimum headphone sound quality just doesn't seem to be a high priority for most manufacturers.

So, if you take your headphone listening seriously the only worthwhile option is to buy something like one of the four little amplifiers we have on test

here. That said, you've got to have a serious pair of cans too. We'd say the best performing headphones from around £70 upwards qualify, though if you're willing to spend up to £250 on an amplifier we'd suggest spending a similar amount on the 'phones. The Award-winning Grado SR325is (£310, right) fit the bill perfectly.

While the headphone outputs in many amplifiers are merely piggy-backed off the main speaker outputs, the circuits in any of our quartet are specifically intended to work with the kind of electrical load headphones exhibit: speakers and headphones have dramatically different electrical characteristics.

This precise matching of amplifier design and headphone electrical load leads to a much better sound.

'Better in what way?' we hear you ask. Well, every way. The sound is purer, considerably more transparent and packed full of subtle detail. Dynamics are stronger, and with products like the Graham Slee Novo and Lehmann Rhinelanders things like timing and rhythm will be better too.



TEST RESULT

There are some very impressive headphone amps here, but it's the **Graham Slee** that takes the honours

IF YOU'RE IMPRESSED by features, the Pro-ject's two inputs and controls will appeal, although it sacrifices sonic quality, while the functional Creek offers a very relaxing listen.

However, performance has to be the most important factor, making this *Test Express* a head-to-head between the Lehmann and the Graham Slee – and for us it has to be the Novo, although it's a close one to call.

Both amps are supremely capable and do little wrong, but the Novo has a sense of involvement that the Lehmann, for all its prowess, can't quite match. If you want a powerful listen, then go for the Lehmann, but if you're after a headphone amplifier that involves you every step of the way, then the Novo is the one for you.

Lehmann Rhinelanders



£250

WITH ITS AUSTERE looks and weighty feel, Lehmann's Teutonic-sounding Rhinelanders is an imposing piece of kit that has a pleasantly dependable air about it. As well as accepting two inputs, it features a nice volume control and a front-mounted metal selector. The Lehmann is conveniently easy to use, despite a lack of markings on the rear.

During its running-in period, our test sample mellowed nicely from an initially bright sound, gaining a neutral, tonally balanced audio. Bass is sure-footed and punchy, treble is crisp and confident, while the midrange is sweet, giving much depth and emotion to vocals. Detailing from the Rhinelanders is good, with production subtleties coming to the fore, and background instrumentation, such as percussion, standing out nicely. We also like its sense of timing, with music sounding cohesive and packed with life and punch.

At £250 this Lehmann is the most expensive amplifier here, but it offers a lively sound that leaps out of your headphones without becoming wearing or brash over prolonged listening. Its accomplished sense of neutrality is a great advantage and you really want to keep listening to the performance it gives. Give one of these an audition and you won't be disappointed.

FOR

Very cohesive sound, exciting listen, great detailing, well balanced in tone

AGAINST

Nothing of note

VERDICT

Its user-friendly sound makes this a very wise buy



Pro-ject Headbox SEII



£200

PRO-JECT'S WEIGHTY HEADBOX SEII offers a lot, with two headphone inputs and two volume controls, meaning you can share your amplified sounds without worrying about annoying anyone with sensitive eardrums.

Plugged in, the Headbox SEII handles different styles of music adequately. Tonally you get a bright treble that could do with gaining subtlety, a confident and supple midrange that excels with vocals and emotion, and a bass that lacks definition and firmness. Detailing is not bad, but the Headbox struggles when picking up musical subtleties, preferring instead to bombard the listener with a quickly wearing delivery.

You could argue that the Pro-ject Headbox SEII offers good value: not only is it the least expensive amp here, but that extra volume control offers an extra degree of flexibility that we don't see in any of the others on test. In short, if you're happy to trade some aspects of performance for a more adaptable product then this is for you. But realistically, do you really need that extra feature for what is essentially a private amplifier?

FOR

Lots of features, practical, good value for money

AGAINST

Wearing delivery, trades insight for features, tonally imbalanced

VERDICT

For the money it offers a lot, but the sound may disappoint

