

GRADO LABS SR200 & JOSEPH GRADO SIGNATURE HP-2 EARPHONES AND HP-1ADC EARPHONE AMP

Company Addresses: SR200: Grado Laboratories, 4614 Seventh Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11220; HP-1ADC and HP-2: Joseph Grado Signature Products, 921 Tice Pl., Westfield, N.J. 07090.

For literature, circle No. 94

A good pair of earphones can provide as much pleasure as a good pair of speakers. Earphones cannot ordinarily reproduce the deepest bass notes, and they cannot reproduce as natural a soundstage from ordinary stereo recordings as speakers do; however, they are free of room effects and placement problems, and they minimize any interference from external noise. They also offer portability and the ability to listen without worrying about sound levels and the neighbors.

Unfortunately, many audiophiles never really enjoy earphones or explore their potential. They treat them as Walkman extensions, paying little attention to the fact that poor or mediocre earphones are a recipe for quick listening fatigue. Worse, they use second-rate earphones to monitor recordings or do serious listening, then compound the problem by using equally second-rate amplifying circuits.

The recent renaissance in earphone design and technology may change this situation. Companies like Stax and Sennheiser have refined their products; Koss has brought back its electrostatic in an improved version; Krell has its first earphone amplifier, and Joe Grado—a long-established leader in the cartridge business—has introduced not one but two new *lines* of high-end earphones.

Grado has created not only two lines of earphones but an earphone ampli-



er and cables designed to do them justice. Under his Grado Laboratories brand, he offers three Prestige Series earphones, from \$150 to \$275, with the SR200, reviewed here, making up the middle at \$200. The three models of his Grado Signature line range in price from \$395 to \$595; the \$495 HP-2, also reviewed here, is again the middle model but differs from the top-of-the-line HP-1 only in its lack of a switch for polarity reversal. (All three models in the Signature line carry the designation "HP 1000" on their cases.)

The Grado Signature system also includes special interconnect cables (\$195 for a 1-meter pair and \$275 for a 2-meter pair) and an earphone amplifier, the HP-1ADC. The hand-built amplifier was designed by Sid Smith of Marantz fame and sells for \$795. It can run on batteries, or an a.c. power supply is available for an additional \$125.

All of the Grado earphones are dynamic designs that represent years of experimentation with new magnets and materials. All are the result of a long series of experiments with different cable and wire designs. All are "open" phones that allow some outside sound to be heard, and all rest lightly on the head and ears, rather than clamp on. Somewhat surprisingly

given the price differences between them, all have a hand-machined look that gives them a definite "high-end" appearance. This kind of styling and manufacturing quality may not affect the sound, but it gives the Grado line an added touch of distinction.

These similarities go beyond design and appearance. The Grado Laboratories \$200 model and the Grado Signature \$495 model have the same general sound character. The SR200, though just \$50 above Grado's least expensive unit, still gives you exceptional bass, a rich and detailed midrange, and upper octaves that are smooth but have just a touch of punch.

This combination of bass power and midrange gives the Grado SR200 a much more musical sound than many competing earphones. No earphone can deliver the kind of deep bass and bass power that comes with the best full-range speakers, but the SR200 delivers a far more solid rhythm line than most earphones. It also has enough bass power to be fully convincing with organ music and bass strings—something far too many high-priced designs can't deliver. If you have rejected other earphones because of missing lower octave power and detail, you will definitely be impressed by the Grados.

Exceptional bass power, plus rich and detailed midrange, give the SR200s a very musical sound.

The greatest strength of the SR200, however, is the midrange. Far too many earphones have a dry middle that lacks lower midrange power. As a result, they accentuate the upper midrange and treble. This sometimes seems to add detail, but only by exaggerating one part of the frequency

spectrum. The resulting lack of lower midrange energy not only is fatiguing but deprives music of a great deal of its romance or emotional impact.

The SR200s do not, however, lose midrange detail. They provide excellent reproduction of musical harmonics and low-level information. Compared

to most earphones in their price range, the SR200s do an excellent job of reproducing difficult piano passages, complex drum sets, massed strings and woodwinds, organ voices, and choral music. Many earphones seem to omit midrange detail; the Grados almost enhance it.

The top octaves of the SR200 are very good, but electrostatic fans are probably going to prefer the flatter and more extended response of the best electrostatics. The SR200 also slightly exaggerates transients in the upper midrange. Rock fans may well prefer this kind of punch, but it reduces the sweetness and air of classical music, particularly violin, as well as instrumental solos—and especially with acoustic guitar.

As for soundstage detail, the SR200s do a very good job of reproducing the ambient sound that helps make performances more realistic. Like all earphones, however, the SR200s create a left/right split in the stereo image unless they are reproducing a binaural recording. Similarly, the SR200s do not reproduce the illusion of depth or place instruments accurately in the center of the soundstage.

Dynamic contrasts are a different story. Many earphones seem to limit dynamic contrasts sharply. All music seems to occur at one volume, and the earphone seems to be most comfortable with a single signal level. The SR200s are much more like good loudspeakers. They have an excellent dynamic range, treat low passages realistically, and have no trouble handling sudden loud passages or transients. Equally important, they are as good in dealing with a full symphony or rock group in full flight as with solo instruments and small groups.

Given this praise for the SR200, what do you get for another \$295 with the Grado HP-2, aside from the personal attention of Joe Grado? The answer will depend almost solely on how demanding you are. The HP-2 provides more detail and musical information in every octave and does not have the upper midrange punch of the SR200. You do, however, get the kind of limited refinement that is of interest largely to professionals or ultra high-end audiophiles. Unless you are really seeking

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The HP-1ADC earphone amp frees the music, opening up every aspect of musical performance.

the best and are an extremely demanding listener using equally demanding signal sources, you will quickly find you have passed the point of diminishing returns.

Your associated electronics and cables also become extremely important in judging the merits of the HP-2 ver-

sus the SR200. Quite frankly, I was a bit stunned at just how much difference the HP-1ADC earphone amplifier made in improving the sound. I had long been aware that most earphone amps in mid-fi audio equipment were little more than afterthoughts, but the HP-2 made it clear that they veil and

harden the sound, and compress musical dynamics and contrasts to an amazing degree. In contrast, the HP-1ADC amplifier literally frees the music. It opens up every aspect of musical performance and has convinced me that no one who is monitoring recordings or seeking true high fidelity from earphones should use a standard earphone amp if they can possibly avoid it.

In short, earphones really do need to be thought of as a system where the electronics are as important as the 'phones. This is why you may well find the differences between the SR200 and HP-2 important only if you are using a top-grade earphone amplifier like the HP-1ADC or exceptional earphone circuitry. It is also why I believe you will find the HP-1ADC to be worth its high cost if you are seeking anything approaching high-end sound and cannot use loudspeakers. Certainly, no portable CD player or DAT unit I could find came close to being able to drive high-quality dynamic earphones with anything like the sound quality of the HP-1ADC amp.

The benefits of the Grado Signature interconnects are more problematic. The Grado interconnects are excellent, but at their price they are strictly for perfectionists. I would listen very carefully, and on a comparative basis, before I gilded the lily with interconnects at this price. I would rather, for example, use the money to buy the HP-2 than buy the SR200 with the top-of-the-line interconnects.

Finally, this advice about careful auditioning is of equal importance when it comes to the question of how the Grado system compares to alternative high-end systems like those sold by such companies as Koss, Sennheisser, Sony, and Stax. High-end earphone systems need to be auditioned just as carefully as speakers, and the bass and midrange balance of the Grados are different from those of virtually all the competition. I would certainly want to hear a pair of high-quality electrostatics shortly before I made up my mind, but I believe you will find the sheer musicality of the Grados to be extremely seductive—particularly if they are played through electronics of the quality of the HP-1ADC.

Anthony H. Cordesman

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Bob Bottman Sensible Sound, Summer 1992

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