

Koss Phase/2: An "Activist's" Headphone



The Equipment: Koss Phase/2, a dynamic stereo headphone with "ambience expander" options; with 3-foot coiled cord extending to approximately 10 feet. Price: \$75. Warranty: one year parts and labor. Manufacturer: Koss Corporation, 4129 N. Port Washington Ave., Milwaukee, Wis. 53213.

Comment: If you like to feel that you are the master of the sounds you hear, the Koss Phase/2 may be for you. It has built-in circuitry that, via a total of four controls, offers a unique range of possibilities—both for overcoming inherent peculiarities of stereo headphone perspective and for providing the illusion of placing yourself where you want to be with respect to the aural image.

On the right earpiece is a two-position "expander" switch marked N (for normal) and E (for expanded). On the left earpiece is a similar "comparator" switch marked +1 and +2 that is spring loaded so that it automatically reverts to +2 when released, providing momentary comparison between the Phase/2's sound and the conventional headset effect. At the bottom of each earpiece is a dial wheel (like the level controls on some Koss models) calibrated from 0 to 10 and independently variable for each channel. At the 0 positions the internal phasing (expander) circuitry is inactive and switching the comparator to +1 does not alter the sound. Turn the earpiece controls toward the 10 position, and the difference becomes progressively more dramatic.

The actual sonic effect of the controls depends on the nature of the stereo signal they're "processing." In this respect the expander action can be compared to quad simulation from stereo program material via a speaker matrix circuit—to which, in fact, the expander circuitry seems similar in that it makes use of phase relationships inherent in the original material to suggest spatial relationships that were not specifically intended in the original sound.

Generally speaking, increasing the settings of the dial wheels makes the music seem more immediate and the stereo perspective more "continuous"—that is, the sounds may seem better related to each other, with less

of the isolation between sound sources that can sound unnatural in headphone (though not speaker) listening. At the same time the imaging of centered soloists often seems to move them out in front of the listener, as opposed to the top-of-the-head sensation that some headphone listeners dislike. If you choose dissimilar settings of the two rotary controls, you can "focus" on the sounds emanating from one side or the other. Switching from N to E on the enhancer introduces more sense of space and seems to surround you with music somewhat more. It also may make sonic placements a little less specific (that is, a little more vague) than the N position, though again the degree of change varies with the program material.

Aside from this spatial juggling, what about the fidelity? We judged the sound from the Phase/2 to be excellent, very much in the tradition of the Koss PRO-4AA, which it resembles in styling as well. Most of the parts—headband, ear seal, and so on—are identical, giving the Phase/2 the same tight seal and good comfort despite its relative bulkiness at a hair over 1½ pounds (less cord). If you want the aural response of the PRO-4AAs, you can simply turn the earpiece controls to 0.

The prime interest here, however, is in the spatial presentation. For the "activist" listener who wants maximum control over aural perspective, this model is unique; for the listener who dislikes headphone listening because he prefers the sense of space and the room-integrated sound of loudspeakers, it may prove a revelation; for the dyed-in-the-earcup headphone listener who accepts (if not demands) "headphone sound," the special features may, particularly at first, seem something of a gimmick and not worth the extra cost. We find that on much stereo material the perspective is more convincing—and perhaps easier to listen to long term—with the special circuitry in operation. Because the achieved effect varies with the program material, we'd urge readers not to make judgments about the properties of the Phase/2 on the basis of only limited listening. And actually the exploration of the expander's potential is half the fun.

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