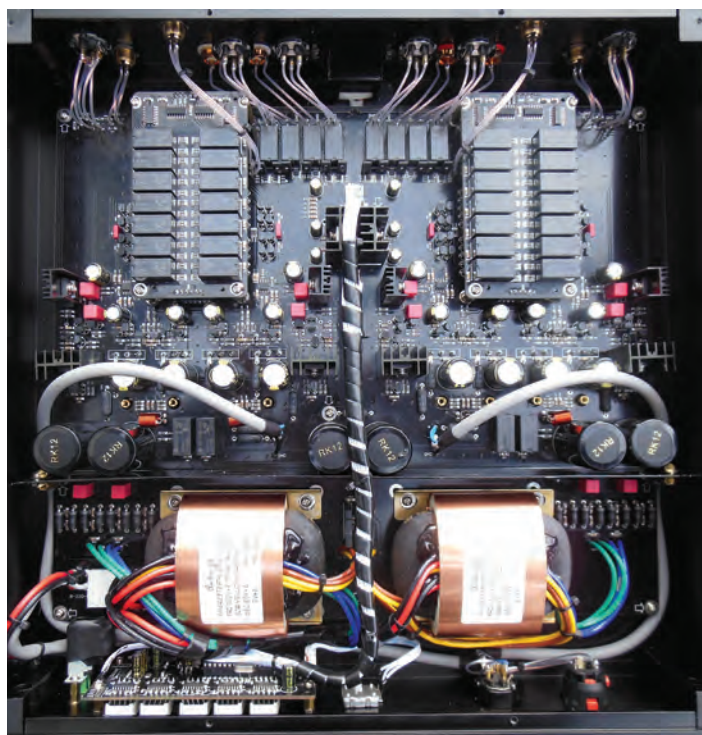


Audio-GD Master-19

KEVIN FISKE GETS TO GRIPS WITH A CHINESE-MADE HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER WITH THE ABILITY TO RE-SHAPE HIS VIEW ON WHAT CONSTITUTES VALUE FOR MONEY IN THIS FAST-GROWING MARKET SECTOR

It is impossible to spend more than just 30 seconds listening to Audio-GD's Master-19 combined headphone amplifier and line stage and not feel a sense of uneasy disorientation. No, given unlimited funds it's not the best device of its type in what is becoming an increasingly busy sector, but this Chinese-designed and -manufactured amplifier blows to smithereens any preconceptions we might have had regarding pricing norms and sonic value.



Audio-GD's Master-19 headphone amplifier isn't alone in appearing to offer remarkable value for money: Am Fang's company Audio Music ploughed a relatively lonely furrow until recently, but now it has been joined by other privately-held Chinese vendors including Denafrips, Holo, Jay's Audio and Hifiman, offering products that pose a direct challenge performance-wise to Western ones.

So what to expect of a headphone amplifier and line stage that costs just over £900? To dismiss Audio-GD's Master-19 because it costs so relatively little would be a real mistake, and one I nearly made myself. I had originally wanted to try the company's flagship Master-9 headphone amplifier since it gets good reviews within the Head-fi community, but European distributor Magna HiFi in the Netherlands told me that

it had been discontinued ahead of a new model being launched later this year. Magna suggested trying the Master-19 instead, framing it as sonically 85-90% of the Master-9, but at half the price.

The Master-19 weighs 7kg, is 36cm wide and deep and 8.5cm high, and has a chassis of black anodised aluminium, meaning that, if nothing else, we get a lot metal for the money. Most of the weight is from the two hefty R-core transformers within, and the component count, component quality and attention to detail in the build is impressive. Audio-GD has made some necessary use of surface-mounted devices, but many components are of the larger hole-through type, of premium Western or Japanese manufacture. Wiring between the functional blocks, including the fully balanced amplification, the 100-step relay-controlled volume control, and the front and rear panels, is point to point, neatly executed.

On the front panel we find a luridly bright blue display indicating volume, input and output settings plus low or high gain. There is an on/off button and three others for mode selection. The volume control spins smoothly, accompanied by the soft clicking of the internal relays. Sockets for 4-pin XLR and 6.35mm TRS headphone jacks sit to the right-hand side. On the back, unusually, we find left and right ACSS inputs for interconnect compatibility with Krell (CAST), and Bakoon and Enleum (SATRI) devices, along with two pairs each of regular balanced and single-ended inputs. One pair each of single-ended, balanced and ACSS outputs is provided.

Brutal power

This is a full Class A zero-feedback current amplifier design, drawing a constant 45Watts from the mains and outputting what in headphone terms is a brutal amount of power: 16W into the 14 Ohm load of my reference Audeze LCD-5 headphone and 630mW into a 600 Ohm load (both figures balanced). That's more than enough to drive Hifiman's notoriously