

when you want to escape into a cocoon of music, or if you want to hear music in a different way to that heard via your trusty loudspeakers.

As with any hi-fi component, there are good and bad headphones to choose from, but purchasing the right set of cans is just half the battle. If you then plug them into a poor headphone amplifier, which is going to restrict sound quality, then most of the cost of the headphones themselves might as well be flushed down where the sun doesn't shine. To prevent a sonic bottleneck it's imperative that you select the best quality headphone amp that you can afford. Fidelity Audio's HPA-100 is the latest example to enter the fray...

Compact at 104x56x254mm and weighing just 1.04kg, despite the relatively large power supply, this unassuming dual mono box is robust and well made with minimal controls on offer. In fact, the front fascia has a 1/4" headphone socket plus a rotary volume knob and a power indicator. The rear of the chassis features an IEC mains socket plus power switch on the right with a pair of phono inputs that sit along a pair of outputs. Inside, Fidelity Audio says the HPA-100 includes two "high performance, low distortion" 250mA audio buffers which are accompanied by low ESR, high ripple, smoothing capacitors and "ultra Fast" HexFred rectifying diodes. All well and good, but how does it sound?

The specification sheet makes a

times that value to share

Running a series of vinyl discs through both units, it was immediately noticeable that the Fidelity offered a more focused performance than the V-Can. The soundstage was a little more organised, the Fidelity appeared to be calmer in its approach to the music, while the more balanced presentation allowed room for its rich bass flavours to flood in. This added to the ability of the Fidelity to discern layers in the vocal performance while texture was more discernible. In effect, the vocal output was more 3D in nature. The human voice can express so many subtle emotions during a song and the Fidelity found it easy to plug into those feelings.

The V-Can is a highly articulate performer with a surprising fluidity for its price but the Fidelity matched the V-Can and then added bass power and a sense of urgency to more driving, rock-oriented, musical pieces. Bass guitar, for example, could be more easily followed with the Fidelity. Each note was rounded and complete rather than, as with the V-Can, a series of connected

digital domain; it never waited for the detail to come to it, it went off and searched for the stuff but it, in turn, did suffer from a well lit presentation which allowed the upper frequencies to dominate the track excessively. The Fidelity however, reigned in that excess by injecting the musical mix with added bass and then supplemented that with extra clarity towards the upper midrange while treble was effectively tamed. Noticeable was how the Fidelity teased and fattened out vocal harmony sequences meaning that, not only could you better discern individual voices, but that each one had more personality and nuance.

The HPA-100 might not be the cheapest headphone amplifier on the market, nor the most lavishly presented, but it's definitely one of the best value for money. This is a well rounded and balanced piece of kit that provides welcome transparency and clarity, allowing any pair of headphones to sing. **PR**



Zoom out