

headphone amplifier



PERREAUX DOES IT AGAIN

Perreaux SXH2 Headphone Amplifier Module

Those gifted gnomes at the Perreaux factory have been busy with their soldering irons again. Last year I reviewed the highly accomplished SXH1 headphone amplifier for >>FFWD, and here we have its successor, the not-entirely-unexpected SXH2. This would seem good news, but let's remember that many are the hi-fi manufacturers who have sought to improve upon a winning design, only to embarrass themselves with an inferior product. Has Perreaux joined this unhappy band? No.

Even before I heard the SXH2, I suspected all would be well. I'd heard a mildly revised version of the SXH1 at Perreaux's Auckland factory last summer, and it definitely constituted a step-up from the original. More encouragement came when I opened the packaging to reveal the SXH2: I was pleasantly surprised to find the clean lines of new casework. Where the old box was your basic black, with a rather miserable wee volume thumb-dial, the new case, while still black, has a polished aluminium face-plate, once again featuring the Perreaux legend machined into its curved surface. The volume knob is much improved — not only larger, but also providing an altogether more rewarding tactile experience. On power-up, a tiny pinpoint of blue light shines above the manufacturer's name, in a fashion both discreet and stylish.

There are other physical changes that earphone die-harders will appreciate more. On the rear panel there is now a switch for high or low gain, giving the SXH2 greater adaptability to a wider range of 'phones than its predecessor. This is the only external sign that things have changed within, but some significant renovations have taken place. Under the hood is a new circuit board carrying a revised circuit design, optimised for low noise and maximum channel separation. Power is up from 750mW to 1w, and the frequency range is wider at both bass and treble ends of the spectrum — not much, but gains of this kind don't come easy.

The SXH2 has a lot to live up to on the musical reproduction front. The SXH1 drove a pair of Sennheiser HD-600s like they

were born to it. In anticipation of even better from the new boy, I plugged in a fresh pair of Sennheiser HD-650s — these are serious 'phones of indisputable pedigree that should reveal anything untoward going on in the sonic department. Driven at the low-gain setting, what I heard was all good.

I should point out that I'm not a habitual headphone user. For me, headphones are a necessary evil — sometimes I simply can't pump up the volume and enjoy an all-over body massage from my floorstanders and sub. Oddly, not everyone in my street needs to hear Leftfield, XTC, or Holst's *The Planets* at one o'clock on a Tuesday

morning. That said, however, good headphones well-amplified are a revelation. Loudspeakers are at a sizable disadvantage when it comes to the resolution you get over cans like the HD-650s driven by the SXH2. On first audition, I felt the treble might be a little subdued, but in fact it was just completely free of the resonance and splashiness that the average soft-dome tweeter is guilty of. Better still was the freedom to "walk" around in the soundscape created in my head, selecting individual performers in a complex musical arrangement and settling down to observe them do their thing. Then, it was easy to step back from the parts and appreciate the whole in which they participated.

Neutrality was exemplary and once again I was well-served for the sense of tangible bass the SXH2 delivered via the Sennheisers. But, is the SXH2 better than its forebear? Yes, primarily in the lower noise floor and in the quality of the treble. Music is laid out on an extremely quiet background, and it's a real pleasure to listen to songs end; hearing the fade of acoustic instruments into silence within a defined space is a treat. The top end seems to have had the very slight sharpness of the SXH1 polished out, without dulling the shine in any way.

Once again, Perreaux has done a lot with a little in the SXH2. I'll conclude as I did in my review of the SXH1: if you're a headphonist, or would like to be, get one of these.

Brent Burmester

TECH SPECS

Perreaux SXH2 Headphone Amplifier Module

Power rating: 1w into 64 ohms
Frequency range (claimed): 5Hz-60KHz
Inputs: 1 pair RCA line-level
Outputs: 1 pair RCA line-level, 2 x headphone jacks
Dimensions (w/h/d): 216 x 181 x 58mm
Weight: 1.4 kg

VERDICT

Perreaux SXH2 Headphone Amplifier Module

PROS: Open, dynamic, versatile, good looking, just about impossible to fault at the price.

CONS: Demands a partnership with excellent headphones — don't insult it with a pair of earplugs on a string.

Sound ★★★★★
 Build Quality ★★★★★
 Features ★★★★★
 Value ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

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