

Meze

99 Classics £260



ANOTHER FINE MEZE

Making headphone ear cups out of wood isn't a guarantee of sonic success, of course, but there's no denying Meze puts great store by its properties, aesthetic and aural. There's an awful lot of curing and drying of the raw material before construction of the 99 Classics can even start, but Meze is sure it's well worth the wait. The process of shaping just a single pair of ear cups can take up to 8 hours. And by the time all the sanding, lacquering and finishing is done, that's over six weeks gone. Any flaws detected in the wood before final assembly, and it's shown the door. Walnut is the staple for Meze, chosen for its sturdiness and 'acoustic properties'. And the company would like it to be known that all the wood it uses for its headphones is harvested from trees that have reached the end of their life cycles, giving old trees a chance to 'shine one more time'.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Meze 99 Classics

ORIGIN
Romania

TYPE
Over-ear closed-back headphone

WEIGHT
260g

FEATURES

- 40mm dynamic drivers
- Quoted sensitivity 103dB/mW
- Detachable Kevlar-wrapped OFC cable with 3.5mm mini-jack
- Hard shell travel case

DISTRIBUTOR
Meze Headphones

TELEPHONE
+40 749 048138

WEBSITE
mezeheadphones.com

And now for something almost completely different. Meze, a small specialist company working out of Baia Mare in Romania, is clearly the David in a group of Goliaths. On the one hand, this means it doesn't have the resources and deep pockets of its bigger rivals. But it also means it can do its own thing and, in the case of its most ambitious headphone design to date, the new 99 Classics, spend quite a lot of time doing it – see boxout. Its appearance gives a strong hint as to why. Wood.

Why wood? It isn't just because it's pretty. Nor is it a unique material among headphone makers, of course. Despite being harder to source and work with, Meze chooses walnut and maple in the belief they give a brighter and more balanced sound than other woods. The artisanal nature of the 99 Classics is clear from the moment you open the extravagantly lovely box

containing the equally OTT hard-shell travel case it comes in.

Here are components you can savour individually or as a rather beautifully screwed together entity: the hand-finished and polished CNC-milled wood ear cups, the cast zinc alloy fittings with electroplated coating, the stamped manganese spring steel headband, the memory foam and soft PU leather ear pads. It's quite something just to handle the 99 Classics for the first time. Meze doesn't anticipate it being a short relationship, either. The headphone can be taken

Every musical nuance has a presence that you can almost touch

completely apart for easy parts replacement. Theoretically, you could keep it forever.

The model on test has the 'walnut gold' colour scheme. If that seems a little too ostentatious (it is), there's a walnut silver alternative (better) or, failing that, maple silver (very tasteful). Accessories, curled up in a separate zipped pouch, comprise two sets of Kevlar-wrapped OFC cables, one with inline microphone/media controller and an in-flight adaptor.

Sound quality

The 99 Classics' self-adjusting headband isn't quite as successful as some in the group, applying a little more pressure at the top of the ear pads than spreading it evenly. It's more of an initial impression than a lasting one, though, and as the headphone is reasonably light, at 260g, it is comfortable enough. Slightly concerning is the bell-like ringing should you accidentally flick the metal part of the headband; the cables are mildly microphonic, too.

Small company slip ups? Maybe. But it doesn't matter. Indeed, who cares? The 99 Classics sound simply glorious – uncannily spacious, brimming with energy and vivacity and a cranked up

sense of performance that's genuinely surprising and frequently riveting. Efficient and easy to drive, it comes across like a pair of speakers that have been 'un-damped' for greater immediacy, impact and musical communication. A starker contrast with the smoothly composed and controlled Fidelio X2 it would be hard to imagine, and it's a difference that will prove divisive. If you want a headphone to provide a gentle, sophisticated background soundtrack to accompany an activity (writing a headphone *Group Test*, for example), give the 99 Classics a miss as the task won't get done. If, however, you want to hear Metheny's *Imaginary Day* in full-blooded stereo with every element given unfettered dynamic expression and every musical nuance a presence you can almost touch, the Meze will make your day. It does mine ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Highly musical; expressive and engaging sound; high-end looks and build

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Some of the gold bits (we'll take maple and silver)

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Simply more enjoyable than headphones usually sound. A gem of a pair

EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★

OVERALL



Group test verdict

Emerging from the listening room with a flattened hairstyle, **David Vivian** ponders the relative merits of six good-looking headphones with a lot to offer

CHOOSING THE RIGHT

headphone is a deeply personal business. Serious headphones simply have to be the perfect fit: physically, aesthetically and sonically. So that's how I've approached this round up. The winner is the one I'd buy having been in the fortunate position to give them all a very fair crack of the whip. If you've read this far, you'll know they all impressed in different ways.

Placing the B&O BeoPlay H6 last was a tough call. It's a lovely thing with off-the-charts style and build and a beautifully judged, even-handed sound that never grates. But fine

detail falls a little short and, although generally comfortable, ear cup pressure and a hard headband, knock off a few more points.

That's not something I could level at the Philips Fidelio X2 which, although bulky and heavy, has limo levels of plushness and comfort. I really like the spaciousness of the sound, too, and the truly great bass – probably the best of the group. But its smoothness is a bit of a double-edged sword, easy to live with but lacking the last few degrees of insight.

Separating the Sennheiser Momentum 2.0 and the Oppo PM-3

isn't easy, not because they are so similar but so different. The Momentum has lots going for it – style, comfort, fold-up portability and musical bones. But, in the end, it's the sheer class of the Oppo that snatches third spot, not least for its terrific build and comfort and a beguilingly natural sound. But, on that score, it suffers in comparison with the other planar magnetic headphone, the Hifiman HE400S. It really presses home its open-back advantage, creating a stunningly transparent, detailed and coherent sound and is a worthy runner up.



WINNER

And so the Meze 99 Classics, the dark horse from Romania, romps home to victory. It's a thing of beauty with wood and gold bling, but more importantly it has a love of musical performance that makes even the best of the rest sound a little dry and po-faced.



Make/model	B&O BeoPlay H6	Hifiman HE400S	Meze 99 Classics	Oppo PM-3	Philips Fidelio X2	Sennheiser Momentum 2.0
Price	£279	£220	£260	£349	£230	£270
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Ease of drive	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	A marriage of style and sound in the true B&O idiom and lovely to behold	High value planar magnetics with speed and transparency to die for	Style and sonics at a great price. Musical and wonderfully entertaining	Closed-back planar magnetic design that gives a real taste of the high-end	Built for comfort, the X2 is no slouch sonically, but a bit of a smoothie	A great all-rounder and sound quality that competes with the very best

Key features

Open back	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Closed back	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Carry case	Pouch	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
6.35mm jack	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Detachable cable	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

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PORTABLE SOURCE:

Acoustic Research AR-M2 £900 HFC 399
The AR-M2 is the standout digital audio player of the moment. It looks great, has a smooth touchscreen operating system and manages to extract every last nuance from all your recordings. It's an ideal source for any headphone.



HEADPHONE AMP/DAC:

Chord Hugo £1,400 HFC 386
The Chord Hugo is an extremely talented headphone amp and DAC in a small, beautifully finished box. It will make a fine partner for any of these headphone designs, with enough power on tap to drive them to the level you see fit.

