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EARS ON



headphones on review

Reviews by Mike Metlay

Of all the headphone reviews I'm doing for this issue, this one's the toughest, because I have to balance attention to three very different new headphones from AKG. The K612 PRO brings a previously unthinkable level of listening quality to a price point that's reachable by any serious recording musician; the K712 PRO takes an existing headphone design that's already won rave reviews all over the world and makes it available to a wider audience than before; and the K812... well, let's not get ahead of ourselves, okay?

We have been reviewing the AKG K Series headphones for many years now; there are certain K models that have entered the history books. I frequently turn to AKG's closed-back K271 Studio phones for my work, and I still have and use a pair of AKG K240 M phones, a fixture in orchestral recording sessions for decades, that have been with me for a quarter century.

a gold-plated TRS miniplug with screw-on 1/4" adapter, connects to the left earcup and is not detachable.

The K612 PRO has a 120 ohm impedance and therefore wants a bit more power in a headphone amplifier than phones with a lower impedance need to get really loud; it will be fine with any professional console or audio interface, but might not get to the levels you want to hear if you hook it up to an iPod or smartphone. Its sensitivity of 101 dB/mW means that it will have good transient response when properly driven. Its frequency response is a far more than respectable 12 Hz to 39.5 kHz.

My first impression of the K612 PRO was of an expansive, detailed, balanced space in which I could live with the music. I could pick out individual instruments easily and home in on details like pick noise on guitars, sibilance in vocals, reverb on guitar amps, and more. While it's possible to listen to a mix as a coherent whole on these phones, the tendency is to hear almost an exploded view of a track with each of its component parts represented clearly. When a mix makes too much use of stereo effects that smear sources across the whole sound field, the overall effect is to produce a sort of dimensionless flatness, and the K612 PRO reveals those excesses instantly.

The frequency response of the K612 PRO sounds almost clinically flat; sources are clearly heard in the soundstage but there's no particular emphasis of bass over mids or treble over bass. It's easy to make accurate use of EQ for surgical adjustment or broad tonal shaping, as the K612 PRO lets you hear precisely what you're doing to each track. The overall sense is that there isn't a frequency curve to speak of; it speaks by its absence.

AKG K612 PRO, K712 PRO, and K812

Pure listening joy, in your choice of excellent, phenomenal... or Oh My Gosh

Keep an open mind

Some engineers prefer open-back headphones because a sealed earcup can have a strong effect on the tonality of audio heard through the headphone, especially in the bass. Open designs are considered by many to give the most accurate listening experience possible on headphones, but they're not suitable for use near open mics because there's no isolation of what the listener is hearing in the phones.

The overall experience of a good open-back headphone can be a revelation; the soundstage seems to extend well beyond the user's head, providing a virtual stereo field where individual sources tend to sit with an accurate and reproducible pan position. While my own studio space favors the use of closed-back headphones due to their isolation, I love the sound of open-back phones when I can get away with it, and I was looking forward to hearing these three new models.

The K612 PRO

I'm not sure if the K612 PRO is the most affordable open-back AKG headphone ever, but certainly no open-back AKG has ever delivered this much quality at this price. It's a circumaural design with large, airy cups that seem to float on the ears. The earcups are supported by a spring-loaded leather headband that adjusts precisely to the size and shape of your head simply by putting the headphones on, a feature that's long been an ergonomic plus for AKG. The velour-covered foam earpads position the drivers without being obtrusive, and the headphone weighs only 238 grams (just over 8 ounces), meaning there is essentially no listener fatigue even over hours of listening. Its 3-meter cable, terminated in



If you've never heard what a good open-back headphone can do for your tracking and mixing, the K612 PRO would be a fantastic place to start. It's an extraordinary introduction to the sonic pictures that AKG headphones can paint.



But if you've already got a good feel for the open-back headphone experience and are looking to raise your game...

The K712 PRO

I won't say as much about the K712 PRO as the other two models, as sonically this headphone has already been reviewed in our pages. In our January 2013 review of AKG's K702 65th Anniversary Edition, I explained that the Anniversary model wasn't just a fancy finish added to the standard K702; its improved earpads offered not only a more comfortable fit but also improved bass response, a noticeably better listening experience over the standard K702 to justify its added cost. That improvement justified the continuation of the model after the anniversary year was over, and with a quick color change from grey/blue to black with orange trim, the K712 PRO entered the AKG catalog to stay.

The K712 PRO has a sensitivity of 105 dB/mW, impedance of 62 ohms, frequency response of 10 Hz to 39.8 kHz, and a weight of 235 grams (just over 8 oz.). The K712 PRO thus offers improved transient response and slightly more oomph when playing back audio from weaker headphone amplifiers, as well as a nominally wider frequency range than the K612 PRO. Its 3-meter cable is detachable and features a locking mini-XLR connector on one end and a gold-plated TRS miniplug with screw-on 1/4" adapter on the other; the headphone comes with one straight and one straight/coiled cable and a carrying bag. The earpads are also user-replaceable if needed.

The K712 PRO takes the listening experience of the K612 PRO and adds noticeably more detail and width in the stereo image; you can hear a bit more bass extension, and the very high treble has so much detail that, as noted in my original review, it can be almost painful to listen to poorly encoded or overcompressed audio. I wrote, "Would they also be good headphones for recreational listening? I'd say yes, but only if you're not in the habit of listening to heavily compressed MP3s, brittle old CD releases, or cheap D/A converters." The K712 PRO, then as now, "is not going to be kind to bad audio, ever."

If it's possible for a headphone to diplomatically balance genuine listening beauty with an almost microscopic level of unforgiving detail, the K712 PRO provides that listening experience.

But what if you want the ultimate? Is there anywhere to go from here?

The K812

There's no need to put "PRO" on the name of the K812. If you're seriously considering owning these headphones, you're a pro, or you have a pro's budget. I've avoided discussing specific prices up until now, but I need to open this part of the review with the punchline: the K812 costs \$1499. Yes, one thousand five hundred dollars, the price of a very good pair of studio monitors.

And you know what? If you play audio through a headphone amplifier worthy of it, and your audio was recorded and mixed and encoded with great care... it *sounds* like it costs that much. I do not get to review headphones like this very often (this makes, um, twice in twenty years?), so ride along with me while I have some really expensive fun.

From the moment you open the box, everything about the K812 bespeaks real luxury. It comes with replacement cables, replacement earpads... and there's even an elegantly curved stand so you don't, Heaven forbid, set the headphones down on a table or something like that!

The K812 boasts a gigantic 53 mm driver, an ultralight two-layer voice coil, and some impressive specs: 110 dB/mW sensitivity and a frequency response of 5 Hz to 54 kHz. The 26 ohm impedance means it's suitable for any and all headphone amplifiers. The 3-meter cable has the usual gold-plated TRS miniplug with screw-on 1/4" adapter at one end and an instrumentation-grade LEMO connector at the left earcup.

The K812 weighs 390 grams (almost 14 ounces), but you barely notice the weight; its earcups are mounted on two-dimensional gimballs that provide a perfect seal to the sides of the head, and the earpads have asymmetric openings to perfectly surround the pinnae, the fleshy part of the outer ear, and aim the drivers precisely. The headband lacks the springs of the other models, and instead has a click-stop system that remembers your preferred head sizing every time.

As luxurious as it is to examine the K812, that's nothing compared to what happens when you put them on and listen to really well-recorded high-definition audio with them. I have one recording of acoustic bass that I had always considered utterly flawless... and I was suddenly hearing a tiny rattle on one string that I'd never heard before. I have another recording that features a large group of backing vocalists, and I had no idea that one of the tenors quietly says "yeah" to himself in the final fade. This isn't *almost* microscopic detail... it's all the way there.

The remarkably flat and neutral frequency response and amazing detail turn out to be a two-edged sword. I can't imagine a better tool for picking apart tracks, bar none... but picking apart tracks is what you find yourself doing, whether you want to or not. A truly emotional and passionate recording may well rise above any technical issues it may have, but these headphones will immerse you in the details, good and bad, as well as the emotions.

Oh, and outright badly recorded or encoded stuff? Forget it. If your recording has MP3 artifacts, overused noise reduction, sample-rate foldover, or anything like that, these headphones will turn them into a weapon that will put one serious hurt on your ears. It's like the K812 has a magical ability to find and magnify anything that shouldn't be there until it's impossible to ignore.

Everyone should hear music they really know well through a headphone like the K812 and a proper amp once in their life. You don't need these phones to make great recordings, any more than you *need* a vintage tube microphone or vintage signal chain... but you owe it to yourself to know what ruthless, uncompromising perfection sounds like.

Amazement times three

After the mind-expanding experience of 24/96 audio through the K812, it's difficult to go back to any other headphone, and the K712 PRO brought back sweet memories of my listening sessions with the K702 Anniversary Edition from last year... but in a way, I think the headphone that's left the most important impression on me is the K612 PRO, simply because it provides so much beauty and accuracy in a form that any recording musician with a decent budget can afford to reach for.

If you think an open-backed headphone is in your future, you're going to find something to love here, be it affordable excellence, a step above the competition, or an astounding pinnacle of audio performance. And they're all from AKG. 🎧

Prices: K612 PRO, \$199; K712 PRO, \$499; K812, \$1499

More from: AKG, www.ake.com

