



Rockin' reads: Our pick of the Summer's best musician memoirs

GROUP TEST: Get out-and-about with our choice of six ace in-ear headphones



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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BOSS PLAYER

Rega's Saturn Mk3 heads up the compact disc revival



BUYING GUIDE
100+ essential components p109

RETRO CHIC
Grado's SR325x stylish open-back headphones

FOREVER YOUNG
Ionic Originals, avatars... what the future of music might look and sound like

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Complete genius
Audiolab's Omnia – a new all-in-one system that delivers the goods

NEWS EXTRA:
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"SPOOKILY GOOD"



Ophidian's Voodoo 3-way floorstander's pure magic

FREE YOUR MIND...



We salute the bonkers brilliance of George Clinton

"TOUGH TO BEAT"



Rotel's RA-1592MKII integrated amp is a champ





Audio-Technica ATH-CKS50TW £150



Audio-Technica's affordable earbuds pack a punch with good sound quality and impressive battery life

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audio-Technica
ATH-CKS50TW

ORIGIN
Japan/Vietnam

TYPE
Bluetooth earbuds

WEIGHT
8g each (buds)
60g (case)

FEATURES
● 9mm drivers
● IPX4 water resistant
● 20-hour battery life
● aptX; aptX Adaptive; AAC

DISTRIBUTOR
Audio-Technica

Audio-Technica's ATH-CKS50TW is one of the most affordable earbuds in the group, but it provides a really good combination of useful features and attractive sound quality.

The earbuds are a little on the chunky side, but A-T says they're designed to fit very securely in the ear while you're moving around, and there are four sizes of ear-tips included. I manage to get a good fit, but some users may still prefer earbuds with a more compact design.

However, A-T does at least take the opportunity to cram in plenty of features. The ATH-CKS50TW supports both aptX and aptX Adaptive, along with Apple's AAC, so it'll be suitable for a wide range of computers and

mobile devices. It also boasts Sony's 360 spatial audio format and allows you to pair the earbuds with two different audio sources – perhaps using your smartphone while watching a film on your laptop.

Audio-Technica's Connect app works well, providing a five-band equaliser, left/right balance adjustment and a Low Latency mode for watching video or playing games. Noise cancelling includes a 'hear-through' option that lets in some background noise so that you can stay aware of your surroundings, and there's also a 'quick' mode with a button-press that briefly lowers the volume if you need to listen out for something nearby. The only minor problem is that the button controls on the earbuds can be a little fiddly. They can require one, two or three button presses to perform different functions, and I find that they sometimes pause the music (one press) before I am able to press the button again.

Sound quality

One advantage of the chunky earbud is that it has enough room for a large battery, lasting for an outstanding 15 hours with noise cancelling turned on or 20 hours when it's turned off. The charging case also provides 1.5 additional charges when you're travelling, making the CKS50TW a good companion for long journeys.

The earbuds may be a bit on the big and chunky side, but the CKS50TW certainly has a light touch. There's a

relaxed, laid-back feel to *The Blower's Daughter*, with just a hint of reverb on Damien Rice's acoustic guitar to give it the feel of an intimate live performance. The soundstage opens up as he launches into the chorus and the electric guitar joins in, swirling gracefully around. As always, though, it's Vyvienne Long's strings that seal the deal, with the ATH-CKS50TW catching all the longing as the cello lingers in the air for long seconds.

The noise cancellation proves to be particularly effective during this gentle track, blocking out both high and low frequencies very well, so that only a few stray voices intrude into the laid-back atmosphere.

That attractive soundstage also works well on Max Richter's *The Waves* as the sounds of the sea swirl around restlessly and create a great sense of atmosphere. The CKS50TW pinpoints the light electronic chimes with great precision, keeping them in sight as the low murmur of the

The battery lasts an impressive 20 hours with noise cancelling turned off

strings swells beneath, creating a growing sense of unease. It maintains its balance as the rest of the orchestra enters, slowly building up a wall – or rather a wave – of sound that sweeps all before it.

Finally, for a real wall of sound, Kate Bush's *The Big Sky* piles up layer upon layer of drums and percussion, but the ATH-CKS50TW handles the onslaught well, capturing the steady pace of the bass drum that drives the final section of the song forward. All the other effects remain clear and balanced, though, even the rattle of the tambourine and Bush's joyous whoops as the song slowly rides off into the distance ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Spacious, well-balanced sound; great battery life
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Fiddly controls; chunky earpieces
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Excellent value for money, with good sound, features and battery life
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL

★★★★★

Group test verdict

These earbuds provide a dazzling array of high-tech features, but sound quality is what really matters, as **Cliff Joseph** reveals


THERE'S AN OLD saying: "the good thing about standards is that there's so many of them". That's very much the case with the Bluetooth earbuds in this group, with AAC-equipped ones catering to Apple owners, aptX for Android and newcomer LDAC for Sony users.

A couple of years ago, aptX seemed to be the option of choice for Bluetooth in-ears, but in 2022 it's Apple's AAC that seems to have swept the board. Klipsch's T5 II ANC is one of the more expensive AAC options, but its experiment with the alternative Dirac HD Sound isn't entirely successful,

and its modest battery life is rather disappointing for the £300 price. In contrast, Denon's AH-C830NCW takes a more back-to-basics approach. It doesn't even have an app for mobile devices, but it provides good sound quality via AAC and its bargain price makes it a great alternative to Apple's AirPods Pro. Needless to say, the AirPods Pro is one of the best options for Apple owners, boasting automatic play/pause and spatial audio. Sound quality is very good, although the design won't suit everyone and the battery is disappointing for the price.

However, all this talk of Bluetooth and codecs is irrelevant for Astell&Kern's AK Zero1. Opting for a wired connection and impressive triple-driver design, it's hardly surprising that the AK Zero1 takes top honours for sound quality. It's expensive, though – more than twice the price of any of its Bluetooth rivals – and lacks active noise cancellation, which is now considered essential by many users.

Technics supports AAC with its EAH-AZ60 and provides strong sound quality, but also stands out with its support for Sony's LDAC.



WINNER

The ATH-CKS50TW might have chunky earpieces, but they squeeze in impressive battery, effective noise cancellation and strong sound quality. And, most important of all, support for both AAC and aptX Adaptive for use with both Apple and Android devices.

Make/model	Apple AirPods Pro	Astell&Kern AK Zero 1	Audio-Technica ATH-CKS50TW	Denon AH-C830NCW	Klipsch T5 II ANC	Technics EAH-AZ60
Price	£240	£650	£150	£140	£300	£200
Sound	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★
Value	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★
Build	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★
Features	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★
	Great design, but really only gives its best when paired with Apple devices	No wireless operation, no problem. The sound is superb, but the price is high	The perfect balance of performance, features, battery life and a generous price	A more affordable Apple substitute with clear, detailed sound and plenty of volume	A delicate sound that is better suited to classical and acoustic material	An attractive price alongside spacious, detailed sound and Sony's LDAC support
Website	apple.com	astellkern.co.uk	audio-technica.com	denon.com	klipsch.com	technics.com

Key features	Apple AirPods Pro	Astell&Kern AK Zero 1	Audio-Technica ATH-CKS50TW	Denon AH-C830NCW	Klipsch T5 II ANC	Technics EAH-AZ60
Bluetooth	SBC, AAC	No	SBC, AAC, aptX Adap.	SBC, AAC	SBC, AAC	SBC, AAC, LDAC
Wired mode	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Noise cancelling	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Battery (ANC off)	5 hours	N/A	20 hours	6 hours	7 hours	7.5 hours
Battery (ANC on)	4.5 hours	N/A	15 hours	4.8 hours	5 hours	7 hours
Wireless charging	Yes	N/A	No	No	Yes	No

TRY WITH THESE

STREAMING SERVICE:
Apple Music **£9.99/month HFC 487**

It took Apple Music too long to adopt lossless and hi-res, but at least it did so without raising its prices. It also added support for Dolby Atmos to provide a 'spatial audio' option – something it claims will work with most types of headphones, as well as its own AirPods.



BATTERY PACK:
Belkin Boost Charge 5K **£50**

If you're travelling with a smartphone and in-ears, a portable battery pack can be a lifesaver. The Boost Charge 5K is neatly designed and affordable, with USB-A and USB-C connectors for charging devices.



PLAYBACK SOFTWARE:
Roon **£120/year HFC 448**

Roon isn't cheap, but it allows you to combine music from many different sources and devices, and wraps it up in a slick, professional interface. The software runs on a wide range of devices too, including Macs, Windows, iOS and Android.



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