

SPECIAL ISSUE! Classic & Modern Microphones For Your Studio

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REVIEW



Audio-Technica

In our March 2014 issue, I reviewed the Audio-Technica ATH-M50x, a redesign of the well-loved ATH-M50 headphone. As I explained in that review, I feel that Audio-Technica chose the best possible way to improve upon a headphone that everyone adored already: they didn't mess with its sound at all, they simply made it more pro-friendly. Keeping the uncompromising sound, fatigue-free comfort, and exceptional isolation of the original design, the ATH-M50x added redesigned and replaceable earpads and a quick-release cable attachment with a selection of cables to suit the user's tastes... a great headphone simply made a bit better.

In this review, I'll tell you about the three new headphones that have been released to fill out the M-Series under the ATH-M50x at different price points and for different intended uses. Come along and meet the ATH-M20x, ATH-M30x, and ATH-M40x!

Look before you listen

Starting at the top and just to refresh your memory from our review in March, the ATH-M50x is a closed-back dynamic headphone with a 45 mm driver, neodymium

magnets, and copper-clad aluminum wire in the voice coils. It offers a frequency response of 15 Hz to 28 kHz, a maximum input power of 1600 mW at 1 kHz, a sensitivity of 99 dB (presumably per mW), an impedance of 38 ohms, and a weight of about 10 ounces. The headphone is designed to fold compactly, and its earcups can swivel by 90° for off-ear use. It comes with a protective carrying pouch and three different detachable cables: a straight/coiled cord (1.2–3 meters, roughly 4' to 10') and a 10' (3 m) straight cord that share a screw-on 1/4" adapter for their TRS mini-plugs, plus a 4' (1.2 m) straight cable with miniplug for use with mobile devices.

The ATH-M20x, ATH-M30x, and ATH-M40x are all closed-back dynamic headphones like their big brother; they also feature neodymium magnets and copper-clad aluminum wire voice coils, but their drivers are 40 mm in diameter. They share a similar earcup shape and padded headband, with slight differences in construction. I will note up front that all three phones offer fantastic isolation in the studio; I wouldn't hesitate to recommend any of them for use in a tracking room with nearby live mics.

The ATH-M40x is closest in feature set to the ATH-M50x, offering the same folding/turning earcup design, carry pouch, and detachable cables (it comes with two, the long straight and straight/coiled cables mentioned above). It has a 15 Hz to 24 kHz frequency response, 1600 mW @ 1 kHz maximum input power, 98 dB sensitivity, and 35 ohm impedance, and weighs about 8.5 ounces.

The ATH-M30x simplifies things a bit, offering a headband design that folds for transport but without swiveling earcups (there's a little bit of play to fit the user's head nicely, but they don't turn completely off-ear) and with a 10' (3m) straight cable with miniplug and screw-on 1/4" adapter that's permanently attached to the left earcup with solid strain relief. It comes with a carrying pouch. Its specs are as follows: 15 Hz to 22 kHz frequency response, 1300 mW @ 1 kHz maximum input power, 96 dB sensitivity, 47 ohm impedance, and 7.8 ounce weight.

The ATH-M20x delivers a stripped-down and no-frills affordable headphone. Its headband has minimal swivel for comfort purposes but doesn't fold; it has no carry pouch,

and its 1/4" adapter for the miniplug at the end of the 10' (3m) permanently attached straight cable is snap-on rather than screw-on. Its specs include a 15 Hz to 20 kHz frequency range, 700 mW @ 1 kHz max input power, 96 dB sensitivity, 47 ohm impedance, and feather-light 6.7 ounce weight.

Listen as you look

The changes in feature set aren't all that's going on here. The three new headphones are also voiced differently from one another, to best suit different applications.

These differences are often subtle, but they're there. I lived with all three models for several weeks and compared them to one another and to the ATH-M50x, and I'll do my best to communicate what I heard as the fundamentals in the listening experience for each headphone.

The ATH-M20x

Audio-Technica markets the ATH-M20x as an M-Series headphone that anyone can afford, and designed it to fit that role: it takes the core sonic essence that made the ATH-M50x such a beloved headphone and strips away everything around it, leaving a headphone that is simultaneously a bare-bones experience and a real joy.

The ATH-M20x has a very flat response that's believable and clear from the deep bass up to the high end; if it doesn't have the extreme airiness in the high treble that one hears in some of the other M-Series headphones, it's not an absence that equates to

pizza money; there is no reason not to have a pair in your studio. In fact, there's no reason to not to have several pairs, fitting out your entire tracking room with reliable, consistent phones for your talent and keeping a pair for yourself in the control room!

The ATH-M30x

The ATH-M30x isn't so much a step up from the ATH-M20x as a step sideways. Yes, it feels a bit more hefty, and the screw-on adapter, folding design, and carry pouch are all nice touches, but the sound of the ATH-M30x is a significant departure from the ATH-M20x and deserves a detailed discussion.

While the ATH-M30x does have more high end, a noticeable sense of space and clarity in the soundstage that isn't quite as impressive in the ATH-M20x, you only notice that once you've gotten used to how the ATH-M30x handles the mids and mid-highs. It's a distinctly mid-forward headphone, designed by Audio-Technica to bring out fine details in vocals and guitars. This distinction, between mids forward and a very flat response with perhaps a perceived dip in the mids, has been around for decades in both monitor speakers and headphones, and there's no real "right answer." With the ATH-M30x, you have a chance to choose the former if that's what helps you mix best, while the other models lean toward the latter.

This is a remarkably exacting headphone in that critical frequency range—just as one example, I picked up a slight sibilance in the

flat and workmanlike and uncompromising across the frequency spectrum. It shares the solid, believable, tight bass that's heard in every one of the other M-Series phones, and adds a bit more "on a clear day you can see forever" to the air band and above, if not to the extent of the ATH-M50x. It also offers a flat and uncolored midrange that at first listen might seem a bit restrained in comparison to the mid-forward ATH-M30x, but there's no sense of lacking detail or compromised balance, just a smooth and universal trustworthiness—especially when listening to acoustic music, from Americana and folk to classical.

The folding/swiveling design is a lovely touch that one doesn't miss until one gets it back, and the detachable cables will make people in pro studios very happy. This is a new and exciting benchmark for a \$100 phone, much as the ATH-M20x is for a \$50 phone.

No wrong choices

If the ATH-M50x and everything it offers is appealing but just a tad too rich for your blood, you should give the ATH-M40x a try. If you've been interested in getting into a mid-forward and highly detailed headphone for tracking and for mixing/editing decisions, the ATH-M30x brings that capability into the hands of pretty much everyone. And the ATH-M20x? When a headphone that does what this headphone can do becomes available for a price this low... it really makes you stop and think.

ATH-M20x, ATH-M30x, and ATH-M40x Headphones

Meet the rest of the family

muddiness. There's no real emphasis on any particular part of the frequency range... perhaps a tiny dip in the low mids but not something I would call a "smiley face" curve. I could easily learn to mix on these phones, and they were my cans of choice for composing sessions leading up to a live solo gig; they sounded beautiful through my Echo AudioFire2 interface (as well as every other quality interface I tried).

The ATH-M20x is one of those products that comes along every once in a while and resets our expectations for every other product in its class. It is a fifty-dollar headphone that frankly beats out several of the far more expensive models we've reviewed in recent months. One staffer with decades of experience in the field, after auditioning it, estimated its street price as *triple* what it actually costs!

There are bad headphones, mediocre headphones, good headphones, great headphones, and phenomenal headphones—and unfortunately the bad ones can come with any price tag. The ATH-M20x is a good-to-great headphone for a price that's basically

lead vocal in the song "Margaret Vs. Pauline" from Neko Case's *Fox Confessor Brings The Flood*. That sibilance is very mild, and a number of good headphones don't pick up on it... but on the ATH-M30x it was instantly and annoyingly noticeable, enough so that if it was me tracking or mixing that song, I'd make a decision on the spot to do something about it. And that says all you need to know right there: this headphone will help you hear and fix problems in your tracks and mixes.

The ATH-M40x

Okay, so what if you have a bit more to spend and you'd like to combine the upper-end clarity of the ATH-M30x with the flatter frequency response of the ATH-M20x, and add a few perks like a detachable cable and earpads that can go off-ear when needed? That's when you step up to the ATH-M40x.

Thanks to my March review of the ATH-M50x (and my trusty pair of ATH-M50s Anniversary Edition phones), I "got" the sound of this headphone the most quickly of all; it has a similar voicing to the ATH-M50x,

The entry point for a really great, reliable professional headphone vs. a merely good headphone has been dropping steadily for years now, but even so, Audio-Technica's new M-Series offerings are a shot across the bows of every firm offering a "good solid phone" for a hundred dollars. You can now get a *great* phone for that much, and a more-than-good phone for half that.

This is affordable quality, and by "quality" I don't mean glitz, hype, sheen, boom, or bling—I mean audio that lets you track and mix with confidence, audio that a professional wants in a headphone. Audio-Technica's designers deserve to take a bow for this entire headphone line; they're going to be turning a lot of heads. ➤

Prices: ATH-M50x, \$239 (\$169 street); ATH-M40x, \$139 (\$99 street); ATH-M30x, \$99 (\$69 street); ATH-M20x, \$69 (\$49 street)

More from: Audio-Technica, www.audio-technica.com/monitorheadphones