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VOL. TWENTY SEVEN
NUMBER SIX



MARCH 2014
USA \$5.99
CANADA \$5.99

EARS ON

headphones on review

Reviews by Mike Metlay



What's new, what's not

The ATH-M50x, like its predecessor, is a closed-back headphone with a 45 mm neodymium driver, built into a lightweight (about 10 ounces) enclosure with a comfortably padded headband and generous earcups, that folds neatly into a carrying bag for transport and has swiveling earcups for one-ear or off-the-ear use. It's available in standard black, white (ATH-M50xWH), and limited-edition blue with natural leather trim (ATH-M50xBL).

It has a frequency response of 15 Hz to 29 kHz, a sensitivity of 99 dB and a 38 ohm impedance. A deliberate decision was made to keep the sonics of the new model precisely like those of the original, so as to retain the loyalty of the many professional users who rely on the ATH-M50's sound.

The main changes to the ATH-M50x have been in taking elements of the headphone that were formerly permanent fixtures and making them user-replaceable, leading to a longer product life in the studio, lower repair bills, and increased satisfaction. First, the leatherette-covered earpad and headband material is upgraded to be more durable and comfortable, and the earpads are now replaceable. Perhaps more significantly to most users, the original permanently-attached cable has been replaced by a set of three different detachable cables. Covering the territory of both the ATH-M50 and the straight-cabled ATH-M50s, the ATH-M50x comes with a 3-meter straight/coiled cable and a 3-meter straight cable, both ending in a gold-plated TRS miniplug with screw-on 1/4" adaptor. But there's also—in a nod to the many users pairing up the ATH-M50 with mobile devices like smartphones and iPods—a lightweight 1.2-meter straight cable ending in a plain TRS minijack. The new cables secure to the left earcup with a twist-lock connector that has a pair of silver lines to visually indicate a positive lock.

Replaceable cables and earcups are a great upgrade, but they don't warrant a full review on their own. However, they do give us an excuse to reacquaint our readers with the sound of the ATH-M50x, which perfectly

Audio-Technica ATH-M50x

Studio-friendly refinements add appeal to a modern classic

We reviewed the Audio-Technica ATH-M50 in our March 2008 issue, and we were very impressed with what it offered. No gimmicks, no earth-shattering advances... just a sound best characterized as "solid and believable". This was a headphone that you could take into the studio with confidence, rely upon for tracking and even mixing if you had to, that gave you what you needed to hear without any fuss or nonsense, and it quickly became a fixture in recording studios all over the world.

In an odd but fascinating next chapter, the ATH-M50 has made the leap to an audience outside the professional audio world. Type in the words "Audio-Technica ATH-M50" on YouTube and see what pops up... would you believe some 63,000 hits? And the top several dozen are online reviews by everyone from professional engineers to tech bloggers, gamers, and home listeners, most of which have the same theme: "I compared the ATH-M50 to [insert fashionable headphone here] and the ATH-M50 grinds it into the dirt." I have no idea how it's happened, but it's suddenly become *cool* to own quality headphones, and the ATH-M50 has become something of a poster child for function over fashion, sound over slickness. If it's possible for a headphone to "go viral", the ATH-M50 has.

With a reputation like that, how do you make improvements? Sensibly, we hope. And the new ATH-M50x does just that: it doesn't mess with the classic sound of the original ATH-M50, just updates it with useful tweaks that make it friendlier to the professional studio. I got one of the very first pairs of ATH-M50x phones in the country, just before its existence was formally announced at NAMM, and I had a lovely time reminding myself of why this is a truly great headphone.

matches the sonic signature of my beloved ATH-M50s/LE anniversary-edition phones and is well worth revisiting.

As I said above, the best way to describe the ATH-M50x is solid and believable. There's no part of this headphone's frequency response that stands out as forward or in-your-face; the extended and tight lows, smooth and detailed mids, and extended silky highs are presented in equal glory and blend neatly into a coherent whole. This is not an exciting headphone, this is an honest one.

My own particular tastes run to using the ATH-M50 (and now the ATH-M50x) in the context of rock and dance music, where the headphone's very refusal to give you slammin' bass or screamin' mids lets you track with real quiet confidence rather than that enthusiastic mania that leads to later listening sessions on studio monitors laced with head-in-hands "What was I *thinking?*" moments. But these phones also represent the quieter sounds of acoustic music, folk, country, Americana, jazz, and even classical music with aplomb. Soundstaging is solid and believable, and everything is where it should be and displayed honestly and without smearing or obscuring of vital detail.

The closed back provides good sound isolation for the tracking room, even when recording vocals, and the swiveling/folding earcups are handy for the artist that needs to hear in one ear while flattening the other earcup against the head or body so he or she can hear the room. Everything about the ATH-M50x is clean, no-nonsense, and a treat to work with, from swapping cables to laying down tracks, from listening to your iPod to checking a 2-mix at the console during a live gig.

If you're a fan of the original ATH-M50, you'll find the ATH-M50x a delightful upgrade with a lot to love. If you're not familiar with this headphone yet, it's not too late... grab a pair and hear them for yourself! They should just be hitting stores just as this magazine goes to press. ☺

Prices: \$239 (\$169 est. street) for black or white; \$259 (\$189 est. street) for limited edition blue

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