

Grado iGrado and SR-80i Headphones

By Tom Lyle

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Price: iGrado \$49, SR-80 \$95

iGrado

With these "street style" headphones available in black or white, Grado enters the MP3 portable market. They are wraparound-type headphones, with the headband resting on the back of

your neck and the ear pads tightly pressed against the ears. They weren't as uncomfortable as I expected them to be, and even though they are not adjustable, they fit me just fine. But I have a more or less small frame.

The iGrados sounded surprisingly good for what they are. I did the majority of my listening to compressed files through the iPod, but also hooked them up to a Headroom Micro headphone amp and played CDs and records to see how they compared to my reference. The bass went unexpectedly deep, and the mids were very clean and relatively transparent. The highest treble was a bit rolled off, but considering their price, the highs were remarkably extended.

I am using words such as "unexpectedly" and "remarkably" because I had to keep reminding myself that these headphones cost

noisy environment, and especially with compressed files (of course), it didn't seem to much matter that they weren't faultless.

Out-of-doors, I'm used to the isolation of the now discontinued \$180 in-ear Shure Ec3s using the foamy earplug-type inserts. They block out most noise, but the iGrados, on the other hand, have little isolation, so occasionally the external noise interfered with the music. I tended to turn up the volume a little too much to compensate for this. On the plus side, the iGrados sounded much more powerful than the in-ears, especially in the bass, where the minuscule drivers of the Shures don't come close to the sense of real low-end that the bigger drivers of the iGrados deliver. I'm aware that the Ec3s—even though they are not a state-of-the-art product by any means—sound much more transparent and as a result more neutral, but the iGrados are larger, and they sound it. But as far as blocking out external noise and a sense of privacy, the in-ear phones are better, and, to me, more comfortable.

One more small complaint I have regarding the iGrados is its cord. Although it is short (40"), which makes it perfect for a portable player attached to one's belt or in a pocket, because it is thin as a thread it often became tangled up

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only \$49, and for \$49 it *is* remarkable that they practically approached what would be considered to be high-end sound, especially when paired with an external headphone amplifier playing uncompressed files (of course). Their overall sound was rather natural, and although they didn't sound like the real thing inside my skull, instruments had a relatively uncolored sound that made it easy to forget that these were of the budget variety. Their sound came dangerously close to Grado's SR-60s, which shouldn't be that surprising given that they use the same drivers. They definitely had the Grado family sound.

Judged against my Sennheiser HD-600s (which cost more than seven times the street price, so maybe it wasn't a fair fight), the bass was a little one-note-ish, the mids were pushed pretty far forward in the mix, and although the treble was more or less adequate, it was, for lack of any other term, sloppy. The overall sound of the phones didn't have nearly the resolving power. But because the iGrados are not sealed nor have any noise reduction capabilities, when used in a

when the headphones weren't in use. But I don't know why I'm complaining—the thicker cord of the Shure in-ears gets tangled up, too, although not as frequently. The iGrados also have a rather small plug on the end of its cord, and even though I liked its width because the small size made it fit perfectly into the iPod's headphone socket even when in its skin, I still have concerns about this diminutive connector's durability.

Even if it seems as though I have more than a few complaints, I'm really just picking nits when you consider their price to performance ratio, which makes these headphones a relative bargain. I'm not going to profess that I'm an expert on these types of hip headphones; but what Grado is obviously targeting is the segment of the youth market who might be even remotely concerned with sound quality. They will quickly realize that the iGrados are unquestionably better than the crappy earbuds that Apple supplies with their iPod, or any other giveaway earphones that come with a typical MP3 player. In Grado's words, the iGrado "outper-



forms anything currently available in the low-end portable market." I agree.

SR80

I'm well aware that the SR80s have been on the market for some time now, but I think it's important to note that perhaps they've lasted for so long because they're just a very good product. [John Grado notes that the SR-80 has been discontinued and replaced with the SR80i (for improved). See manufacturer's response.—Eds]. They have not been revised to Mk. IV-a status, so perhaps Grado must have done something right the first time. For a lousy \$26 more than their lowest priced model (apart from the iGrado)—the SR60s—they don't come anywhere near to breaking the law of diminishing returns. They are way more comfortable, and that alone is worth the extra pocket change.

Sound-quality-wise I would dare say that the venerable SR80s come within earshot (sorry) of the basic qualities that make the Sennheiser HD-600s so good. When I hooked them up to the Headroom headphone amplifier, the bass was deep and tuneful (Grado claims the bass goes down to 20Hz, but gives no accuracy) and the mids were quite transparent. The highs were excellent, although I think that's the area that highlights the difference between the Grados and the Sennheisers. The more expensive cans' treble was more detailed, with each sound differentiating itself more than the others and more natural sounding.

The more expensive headphones' dynamic capabilities also set them apart from just about any others that I've heard. But don't get me wrong, the SR80s' rolled-off highs and other slight limitations still left them in good company, and when you consider that they only cost \$95, it is astonishing that their overall sound quality is so good.

TESTING

I was amazed how good the doctored live version of *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* from the Genesis' box set *Archives, Vol. 1: 1967–1975* sounded when using the Headroom amp with an Arcam CD player. On this recording the bass guitar and synth bass pedals were extremely powerful, as they should be. Although the mids were a little pushed forward, there was still a good level of transparency and sufficient detail. Cymbals and the other high-frequency sounds were quite good, and it was easy to detect that there was some signal processing applied to the otherwise excellent recording. Even though they couldn't compete with the best, there were still plenty of passages that showed the phones had very good dynamic capabilities and punch. They rocked.

I also played John Adam's *Chamber Concerto* performed by the Ensemble Modern on RCA released in 1997. On this CD I again noticed some sins of omission such as the highest treble, but all in all the sound was excellent. The strings sounded like real instruments recorded in a real space, and

the winds and percussion were locked in place within the soundstage between my ears. Even though the SR-80s weren't perfect, it was easy to become lost in this great music.

The Grados are much more efficient than my Sennheisers. When listening to an iPod the more expensive headphones are nearly useless without an external headphone amplifier. Whether that is because of their challenging impedance characteristics or just simply their lower sensitivity, I'm not sure.

Yet when listening to the Grados through an iPod without the external amplifier they were so much easier to drive that their bass ended up being stronger, and the mids and treble seemed to pass from the source to my brain with greater ease. I don't know why I'm going on about using the SR80s with an iPod so much; the cord is much too long to use outside, and they have little or no isolation. But, I did spend some time listening to them this way indoors while desk-bound and they performed admirably.

Audiophiles tend to spend much more than \$100 on a pair of speakers, so it makes sense that you might spend more than that on a set of headphones. So, sure, you could spend more money on a pair of headphones, and I doubt that spending more on a pair from the Grado catalog won't bring you closer to the music. But considering that they only cost about as much as ABBA's *The Complete Studio Recordings* box set, the SR80s are a steal. You could use these headphones, like the iGrados, as a stepping stone to Grado's more ambitious efforts, or use them as part of a long-term daily regimen of sustained musical enjoyment. Highly recommended.

Manufacturer's response:

What does the *i* stand for in the new SR80*i* from Grado? Improved, that's what! Built on the same features as the SR60*i*, the SR80*i* utilizes a four-conductor connecting cable, and the diaphragms are put through a special "de-stressing" process in order to enhance inner detail, the result of which gives a more open stage. The new SR80*i* has an upgraded driver design, and they have enlarged and improved the mass distribution in the plastic housing. The way the SR80*i*'s new driver and plastic housing move air and react to sound vibrations are now less affected by transient distortions. The SR80 provides an improved bass resonance, which enhances the overall detail. With the SR80*i* you will notice improved control of the upper and lower range of the frequency spectrum with both better supporting Grado's world renowned midrange. The SR80*i* will produce a sound that is pure Grado, warm harmonic color, rich full bodied vocals, excellent dynamics and an ultra smooth top end. Listen and enjoy!

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