

Elmore James Tribute * Composer Mark Isham * Multichannel Preamps With I/O * Valerie June Live!

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MIX

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>REVIEWED

STEINBERG WAVELAB 9.5
GRACE DESIGN M900
HAFLER HA75-DAC TUBEHEAD
STEALTH SONICS C9 IEM
SOUND RADIX POWAIR

KIRK FRANKLIN AT HOME

TOP GOSPEL ARTIST/PRODUCER MAKES MUSIC IN UNCLE JESSIE'S KITCHEN



PRODUCT SUMMARY

COMPANY: StealthSonics

PRODUCT: C⁹IEMs

WEBSITE: www.stealthsonics.com

PRICE: \$1,499

PROS: Ultra-realism in an IEM. Smooth and balanced reproduction. Stellar low end

CONS: C⁹ fits perfectly but takes some practice seating the units properly in your ear

tening source with an outstanding DAC and amp, it has balanced outputs that can drive speakers, switchable inputs between analog and USB, plus the Load and Focus features. Without a doubt, you're getting more than you pay for with the HA75-DAC.

ears, but as a blend of the two. It works remarkably well.

Also on the front is a three-position Vox switch. The center turns the Vox effects off, while the Down position is a loudness enhancer used to compensate for the Fletcher-Munson curve when listening at low volumes—like an old-school receiver. The Up position boosts low frequency at the output and is used to simulate the effect of certain styles of headphones that are hyped at the low end. A Load rotary toggles through six possible output impedance settings meant to help match the HA75 DAC to a wide variety of headphone/IEM products.

On the back is a bevy of ins and outs, including balanced stereo XLR inputs, unbalanced stereo RCA inputs, a USB input (Type B), a Thru output (RCA) that receives the input without going through the tube circuit, and a Tube output (RCA) for those who want to introduce tubey warmth in the signal path between a preamp and power amp. Amplification is a 12AX7 dual triode tube operating with a B+ of approximately 140 Volts, the same as the original HA-75 from Hafler.

All tech and features sum up to the fact that the HA75-DAC TubeHead sounds fantastic. It was a treat to listen to a variety of sources through two sets of IEMs, the C9 from StealthSonics and Ultimate Ears Capitol Remastered, and the Sennheiser HD 800 open-backed headphones.

For starters, there is plenty of clean gain to be had (30 dB), no matter the listening option. The Focus feature is not a gimmick; it makes listening with headphones more believable in a good way. I choose to dial the Focus rotary at about the 10 o'clock position. Anything higher than that got too "roomy" for me and was an image spoiler. The takeaway is I wouldn't use it to ultimately check my panning on a listening pass but it's great to have it on for a gut check of how my mix might sound through monitors.

I chose to leave the Vox feature in the center (off) position as a matter of personal taste, but the Loudness and Bass enhancements do what they advertise. The Load feature paid off when I switched between listening sources. It's much more apparent when using IEMs with their low input impedance. Each position change on the rotary greatly affects the volume and loading. The best results came when I matched the impedance to my headphones or IEMs. For example, the HD 800s are at 300 ohms, and that's where I put the TubeHead's dial on a blind listening test before I looked up the spec. The same happened with the C9 IEMs, which are rated at 16 ohms. I preferred the 20-ohms setting on the TubeHead, which is exactly where I put it before I knew the C9's rating.

The TubeHead is a definite "buy." Not only is it a stellar desktop lis-

STEALTH SONICS C⁹ IEMs

Stealth Sonics is a new company just breaking into the U.S. market with its universal and custom-fit IEMs, including the flagship C9 reviewed here. The CIEMs come in a customized aluminium round case that is watertight and large enough to comfortably store the IEMs, a cleaning cloth and brush, a ¼-inch adapter, a 1.2-meter standard cable, and a 1.2-meter iPhone cable (MFI). If you love your current universal-fit IEMs and don't want to break the bank, Stealth Sonics offers KozyFits, which mount your personal IEMs into a custom-fit earpiece.

The fit with any IEM is critical to a great listening experience. Stealth Sonics has enlisted a worldwide network of audiology partners, who are ready to take second-bend ear canal impressions. This positions the end of the port within millimeters of your eardrum. My only observation (not a complaint) is how the upper part of the C9 seats into the triangular fossa of the ear then twists into the ear canal. Once they're in, they're perfectly seated, but it takes some practice to get them there. The warranty is one year, and there is a generous 30-day refit policy should you not like how your IEMs feel when parked in your ear.

The drivers are housed in a proprietary, acoustically optimized composite material that promises a frequency range of 18 Hz to 40 kHz. Other tech is explained by Stealth Sonics and "includes extra-large bores that preserve airflow and sonic fidelity and advanced damping features to manage resonance." The configuration of drivers includes One Dynamic (Low); Two Balanced Armature (Mid); Two Balanced Armature (High), and Four Balanced Armature (Super High). There is a minute port at the top of each earpiece that facilitates unidirectional movement of air from within the enclosure. This allows the dynamic driver to efficiently move air at the output, greatly enhancing the bottom end.

My listening tests with the C9 were a revelation. The reproduction is balanced and smooth, and the bottom end is rich and full. I've heard many IEMs, both custom and universal, and it's tough to get it right. Whatever scientific mojo is happening inside the C9, it's getting the job done with spectacular results. On some tracks played out of the Grace m900 and Hafler HA75DAC, the C9s stood up to all tests. The C9s exhibited full-bodied low end, and stellar separation and balance between highs, mids and lows. I would trust these monitors for my mix decisions across the board—EQ, panning and balance. How Stealth Sonics fits nine drivers into such minimal space and makes them work the way they do is scary-good. With the right DAC and amp, the C9 is a winner and worth the price. ■