



STAX SRS 2170 £745

Japanese manufacturer Stax have been making headphones (or earspeakers, as they refer to them) since 1950 and have developed a great name for themselves, becoming synonymous with electrostatic transducers in the same way that Nakamichi did with cassette, for example. The SRS 2170 system is the latest incarnation of the breed. Priced at £745 they are the new entry level model, replacing the SRS 2050.

The supplied SRS-252S energiser has a completely revised circuit topology incorporating an all-stage balanced circuit DC amplifier, housed in an extruded aluminium case measuring 132x38x132mm and weighing 540g. The claimed frequency response is from DC to 35kHz and the amplification provides 58dB of gain (x800). All of this is powered by a plug mounted transformer providing 12V DC, 4W.

Although visually similar to their predecessors, the SR-207 electrostatic earspeakers come with a new diaphragm, new stators and a high rigidity resin case. The diaphragm is the same as used in the more expensive models in the Stax range, as is the 2.5m long cable, which is a 6 strand parallel structure type with a low capacitance, made using LC-OFC. This is thoughtfully marked for ease of orientation of the earspeakers with a solid line on the left channel and a dotted one for the right (white against the black background). The resin case is also black, as

are the synthetic leather ear pads. Total weight including cable is 490g. Claimed frequency range of these is 7Hz to 41kHz, and are capable of a sound pressure level of 101dB at 100mV R.M.S.

I have used Stax earspeakers before, and was impressed with their level of comfort over extended periods of use. I am not normally a headphone fan, finding most designs feel too clamped to my head. These I found quite effortless to wear (even with my glasses on), with fit being adjusted by a synthetic leather strap that goes over the head beneath the resin head spring arc which connects the two ear units. It would have been nice to have leather covered earpads though, instead of Stax's favoured nineteen seventies car seat vinyl – I wouldn't think it would add much to the overall price, and would make long listening sessions less sweaty.

As well as being generally very comfortable I was extremely impressed with the sound which I found to have a spatiality that I have rarely found with other units. Playing a 1962 Editions L'Oiseau Lyre recording of The Academy of St. Martins-In-The Fields performing a selection of baroque concertos, the stereo spread was quite wide, with enough space between the instruments for me to focus on a particular strand of the music and follow it easily. The tonality, especially in the bass regions, surprised me. Bass seemed solid and deep, with enough body to be believable, but free of overhang.

The midrange was well described in a very lucid manner that drew me into the music, displaying little nuances of the players' technique which, when heard through loudspeakers were there, but not as accessible. The higher notes were firmly placed, both in space and in shape, with violins having an almost military precision to their attack. They were not sharp sounding but had a strong presence and bite to them, rather than the sometimes cloying sound that I have heard through other headphones.

When faced with more beat-driven sounds the Stax rose to the occasion superbly, rhythms stopping and starting precisely in a way that few speakers that I have heard can match.

Although these are the entry level unit in the Stax range I found they offered a sophisticated and detailed sound that I found musically enjoyable and seemed tonally authentic. I have heard these earspeakers described as the Rolls Royce of headphones, and now having lived with a pair for a while, I can understand why. Although apparently very expensive, if you consider that a top notch pair of dynamic headphones plus a decent headphone amplifier would hardly be any less, suddenly they seem better value. Stax is very much a cult headphone brand, and long may it run.

TB

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