Apple AirPods: the audiophile review



As *The Verge*'s resident headphones obsessive, I'm not supposed to like the AirPods. My initial reaction upon first seeing them many months ago was to pour scorn on Apple's designers for crafting a pair of expensive and easy-to-lose cigarette butts. The AirPods were the resurrection of the awful Bluetooth headsets of years past, I thought. But this year, I finally got around to testing a pair of the AirPods for myself, and I finally understand why everyone who owns them loves them.

Taking the AirPods seriously hasn't been easy for me. I spend my days attached to large and pricey headphones like the exceptional Audeze MX4 because my priorities are heavily skewed in favor of maximizing sound quality over convenience. Convenience for audiophiles is a pair of cans that don't require a toaster-sized amplifier. So when I first cast eyes on the AirPods, all glossy, frail, and vanishingly small, I had no faith that they'd sound good enough to justify their price. Hearing they were just like the EarPods didn't fill me

with confidence either.

So much more than just wireless EarPods
But here's the thing: using the AirPods isn't merely a "wireless EarPods" experience. Or rather, there are surprising aspects to making the EarPods wireless that I didn't appreciate until I used the AirPods. My impression of the EarPods has always been colored by how loosely they sat in my ears. The merest tug or tension on their wire would unseat them. Well, without a wire, that entire issue is obviated, and moreover, the stem of the AirPods sits flush with the side of my face and helps to anchor them in place. I have run with the AirPods, I've done push-ups, lifted weights, and moved around vigorously without either one coming close to falling out. Your mileage will, of course, vary, but I can't say the same about Google's Pixel Buds or the majority of other earbuds on the market, wired or wireless.

Because the AirPods are so much more comfortable for me, I find their sound is also more dynamic and emotive than anything I've heard from the EarPods. Apple isn't threatening any hi-fi audio companies (yet), but I think that both it and Google have figured out a new class of high-enough-fi for audio products that appeal with strengths other than sound quality. The Google Home Mini and Pixel Buds also sound extremely decent for their compact dimensions.

Apple's sound is good enough for most people, myself included
The AirPods convey a full sense of the mood and intent of the music I listen to. By that, I mean that they're not technically spectacular. They don't fill my world with a sparkling shimmer when listening to "Rachel's Song" on the Vangelis *Blade Runner* soundtrack, but they still put me in that longing, wistful mood. Similarly, the AirPods' bass doesn't make my world shake, but it still hits with surprising impact on songs like Woodkid's "Iron." There's enough of everything – bass and treble extension, soundstage, clarity, and detail – in Apple's tuning to render a convincing

reproduction of most genres of music.

I say the AirPods aren't technically amazing, but that's only when comparing against existing standards for sound quality. In the category of truly wireless earbuds, the AirPods are the best I've yet heard. Bragi's The Headphone and Dash Pro left me underwhelmed, with the latter being especially bloated and disfigured by an overabundance of bass. At CES this year, Jabra introduced the Elite 65t, which sound good, but I can't listen to them for longer than 15 seconds without the wireless connection dropping out.

Apple's AirPods design, which I initially ridiculed, is actually the best and most functional one available for truly wireless buds today. Because Apple moved the Bluetooth electronics and batteries to the stem, it was able to use the full cavity of each bud for sound reproduction. That's how the AirPods reproduce a wider soundstage than most Bluetooth earbuds without being any thicker or protruding from the ear. For a counterexample, you can try listening to the Jaybird X3s, which are very well tuned, but everything inside them sounds condensed like a closed accordion because of how close the sound driver is to the listener's ear. Apple's design compromise, extending that stem down toward the face, is simply the most optimal one we have at the present time. Yes, the AirPods are designed for function first, in spite of their stylized appearance.

The AirPods work brilliantly with Android devices, too
I started testing the AirPods alongside the iPhone X a few weeks ago, and the seamless pairing between the two is just as wonderful as advertised. But I've now spent the last two weeks using the AirPods with a Google Pixel 2, and that's been entirely unproblematic, too. The only missing features on Android are the auto-pause and the battery life indicator on the phone — neither of which I miss. Maintaining a consistent and reliable Bluetooth connection, the thing I actually care about, is still sadly uncommon among truly wireless buds, so

Apple’s wireless earphones are easy to recommend even to Android phone users.

My wireless-doom scenario is walking into my kitchen, which is so full of metal things that it’s like a Faraday cage, while leaving my music source device in the bedroom: every non-Apple pair of wireless headphones I test becomes unusable in that situation. With the AirPods (and the Beats Solo and Studio 3, which have the same W1 wireless chip) connected to my MacBook Pro, I actually maintained a pretty decent connection with only minor dropouts in the kitchen.

The design of the AirPods case is a total masterpiece. It’s tiny but holds multiple extra charges for the earphones, and the rounded sides make them irresistible fidget toys. The tension of the case lid is perfect, delivering a satisfying snap when it opens and closes. When I was trying out the Elite 65t, by contrast, I managed to chip a nail trying to open their (similarly shaped, but infinitely more finicky) case. Anyone who’s used the AirPods will know the experience of absent-mindedly opening and closing their case for minutes at a time. It’s subtly great design, where both form and function are served to the utmost degree.

The price is fair and the compromises are acceptable
The AirPods still come with substantial compromises. They don’t isolate external sound at all, and so you can carry on a conversation with someone next to you without ever taking them out. That renders the AirPods difficult to use for noisy urban commutes (where you’re likely crank up the volume to unsafe levels to compensate), and it also leads to people just leaving them in at all times, which is irritating to others. The four-hour battery life on a single charge isn’t great. The price is higher than most people are happy to spend on earphones for uncritical daily listening. And that Lightning charger totally spoils the USB-C hegemony of my current tech loadout.

But when I look at the limits of what’s possible today — in terms of miniaturization of audio and wireless components — I can’t see a better combination of price, features, and performance than what’s offered by the AirPods. The price is fair and the compromises are acceptable. I make it my job to review (and enjoy) super heavy and expensive headphones that do amazing things with music, recreating and illuminating every minute detail of a recording. That makes me extremely picky about any products I listen to, and the thing the AirPods share with the giant cans built by the likes of Audeze and Focal is that they convey the sense and intent of the music. And the reason I now reach for the AirPods even when I’m at home, the unique thing that delights all their users, is their unrivalled ease of use.

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