The Verge 2018 tech report card: Headphones

Headphones did not have the most auspicious start to 2018. Back in January, it seemed like a diversity of competing voice assistants, wireless audio protocols, and idiosyncratic control schemes would lead to a fragmented mess of a market. Everyone wanted wireless headphones, and the providers of those devices were keen to establish some sort of a walled-garden effect around their particular product.

The demand for more technologically advanced headphones has only increased over the course of the year, however the threat of user-hostile competition among headphone makers has not materialized. In large part thanks to integrated wireless chips that bundle Bluetooth radios with the necessary voice assistant compatibility for both iOS and Android, practically every manufacturer was able to issue a new pair of wireless headphones in 2018 that played nice with both Siri and Google Assistant. So the fragmentation crisis has been mostly averted, though the rapid pace of improvement is also leaving a lot of people stupefied at how quickly their new headphones are being superseded.

the fragmentation crisis was mostly averted

Sony’s third-generation 1000X M3 cans emerged as the new wireless noise-canceling champions. Sennheiser’s Momentum True Wireless raised the bar for sound quality from truly wireless earphones, albeit with a number of usability flaws. Audio-Technica’s M50xBT and OnePlus’ Bullets Wireless elevated the quality we can expect from more affordable Bluetooth headphones and earphones. Even old-school brands like Grado and Koss released their own wireless editions this year. The choice and quality of wireless audio gear have never been better, and the disappearance of the 3.5mm audio jack from smartphones is no longer the awful nightmare it used to be.

OnePlus and Google both introduced terrific USB-C earbuds this year — the Type-C Bullets and Pixel USB-C earbuds, respectively — with super low prices that matched the old 3.5mm analog earphones we'd carry everywhere with us. 2017's legitimate complaint that USB-C earphones are too expensive and wireless headphones are too much of a compromise is no longer true. With companies like Apple and Lenovo starting to remove the headphone jack from their tablets as well as phones, the trend toward wireless and USB-C varieties of headphones is only accelerating. It's time for the majority of us to finally make the transition away from the old analog connection.

Audiophiles will of course continue on with their exotic XLR and quarter-inch connectors, and their segment of the market was well served in 2018 by two boutique US companies: Audeze and MrSpeakers. Audeze launched the LCD2-Classic at the tail end of 2017, and it followed up with the LCD2 Closed-Back in 2018, both of which set new highs for the quality and pleasure of sound you can get for under $1,000. In fact, those two sets of LCD2 models make a compelling case for never having to spend four figures on headphones again: both offer sonic clarity, detail, and precision on a par with headphones that cost multiple times more. Then again, MrSpeakers launched the $2,000 Ether 2 at the end of the year, and the design and performance of those headphones offers up a super compelling argument for why you *should* splash out on exotically priced headphones. The Ether 2s have an uncommonly wide and natural soundstage, which combines with a beautifully incisive and organic sound with few rivals. Which is to say that the audiophile segment is thriving too.

Photo by Vlad Savov / The Verge

There are a couple of aspects of the headphone business that can be critiqued, of course. Firstly, even while battery life

and wireless performance have been on a steady path of improvement, the process of pairing and connecting Bluetooth headphones to other devices remains dicey and unpleasant for most users. Apple’s AirPods and their seamless pairing stand head and shoulders ahead of any rival on Android. The other issue is one of price: headphone manufacturers seem more willing to add features and capabilities to existing products at existing prices than to erode their profit margins. It’s no accident that the companies with the most aggressive pricing in 2018, OnePlus and Google, don’t have headphones as their main line of business.

Overall, the headphones market has been the most dynamic and intriguing section of consumer tech this year. While smartphone makers were busy fiddling around the edges of display notches, headphone manufacturers really improved the substance as well as the style of their products. Microsoft, Dolby, Anker, and the countless gaming gear brands also expanded the bewildering plethora of headphone choices this year, and the trend for 2019 is for everyone to continue transitioning to USB-C, for charging at least, while the entire headphones category continues improving faster than anything else in tech.

Final Grade: A

A 2018 Grade

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Gold Stars

- Good USB-C earphones are now as affordable as analog ones
- Noise-canceling wireless headphones have gotten even

better
- Wireless earbuds also got a boost in sound quality
- Audiophile gear continues scaling new heights of excellence

Needs Improvement

- Still some laggard wireless models with MicroUSB charging
- Bluetooth pairing and syncing remain inhumanely awkward
- Prices aren’t falling as fast as they could be

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