



Alpha Design Labs

ADL-EH008 in-ear phones

A SUB-BRAND OF Japanese company Furutech, Alpha Design Labs originally started to sell entry-level products (most Furutech kit is reassuringly expensive), while maintaining decent quality. But ADL is now creeping upmarket, making ever nicer and more luxurious products from portable DACs and headphone amplifiers to headphones and now in-ear phones such as these. The ADL-EH008 is the company's flagship product in this latter category, and it shows.

Build quality is superlative, better than expected even at this price. There really is nothing to criticise, as it's up there with more familiar brands costing upwards of twice or three times the money. The product certainly confers a sense of discreet luxury, using excellent materials while eschewing the flashy packaging that some Japanese products suffer from. They come in a small zip-up travel case, carefully suspended in dense black foam rubber; although I suspect most will end up coiled around someone's iPhone 5S before too long! Being an in-ear design they have flexible rubber earpieces (in XS, S and M sizes) supplied – these are easy to fit and should work well in most lugholes. A 1.3m connecting cord with 24k gold-plated stereo 3.5mm plug comes as standard.

Ace of bass

ADL says the phones use a special Dual Dynamic Driver, which has been cryogenically treated. Interestingly it comprises an 8mm mid/bass driver that sits behind a 5.6mm titanium film tweeter in a special chamber tuned to give the right amount of bass. These are then set into the inner and outer housings, the former being made from special ABS resin and the latter from light but rigid carbon-fibre. Diamond-cut aluminium end caps add just the right amount of visual interest while avoiding the bling of rivals that seem more interested in 'style' than sound.

The phones are very easy to wear, not least because they're so light at



just 15g. Other vital statistics include a claimed 20Hz to 20kHz frequency response and a claimed sensitivity of 100dB (± 3 dB) SPL (130mW input at 1kHz) and rated impedance of 19ohms – this means they should sound even and go reasonably loud with the puny headphone output sections that most smartphones and portables now have. And so it proves – whether driven by a high-quality headphone amplifier or an old MiniDisc portable, the EH-008 go loud. Construction is excellent, even down to the rubberised signal cable that's refreshingly unimicrophonic.

Alpha Design Labs' house sound is a most amenable one. Whether it's the portable DAC you're testing or the latest phones, there's a crisp performance majoring on detail and rhythmic drive, but with subtlety too. There's definitely the sense that this is a neutral sounding set of in-ear phones. Whether you're listening to The Beatles' *White Album* or the Dub Pistols' version of The Specials' *Gangsters*, this little in-ear phone lets you hear it unimpeded in its full glory.

The sound of in-ear phones can vary enormously, depending on the sort of fit they achieve in the ear. In my case they go in as well as any Etymotic and nor do they fall to pieces after extended use. Bass is strong but not overblown, giving agile handling of leading edges of notes; for example

Bassheads' *Is There Anybody Out There* sounds very finely balanced, fast and engaging – and this extends up to the midband, which is wonderfully clean and open. I really like the way they handle complex pieces of music, failing to fall apart when multiple strands of the mix kick in. This is a highly detailed design that doesn't sound analytical; rather it pieces everything together in a musically coherent way that leaves you wanting more.

Treble without a cause

Treble is a joy; the cymbal work on *Going For The One* from the classic Yes album of the same name has a lovely metallic sheen to it, as does the squelchy synthesiser work, dripping with harmonics. Even on this dense, tonally rather forward track, this in-ear phone doesn't grate or descend into hardness. It's interesting because you'd never put it down as an overly warm or sumptuous sound, yet it resolutely refuses to sound hard or thin. Rhythmically it stays composed, and proves particularly good at tracking dynamics; no compression is heard. Spatially, the EH-008 does a great job too – as much as you can tell from headphones. Overall then, this is another impressive product from a brand that's fast making a name for itself here. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£175

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OUR VERDICT
★★★★★