



HOME PAGE > HEADPHONES

The Best \$200 In-Ear Headphones

JULY 28, 2013 LAUREN DRAGAN

In-ear headphones are a tricky purchase. Not only do you have to take into account sound and build quality, but fit is of utmost importance. The right fit can be very personal, so when you find a pair of in-ear headphones that are liked by many different people (with very different ears) you've found something special. And when everyone agrees that same pair sounds fantastic, you've got a winner. That's why we recommend the **RBH EP2s**.

Last Updated: October 23, 2013

See the Long Term Test Notes section at the bottom for an update on the RBH and B&W models.

After looking at tons of professional reviews, Amazon reviews, forum listings, and the results of a listening panel consisting of audio professionals, the RBH EP2s came out on top.

Why In-Ears? (and why are they worth \$200?)

In-ear monitors are made to travel. They should be compact, portable and easy to pop in a bag in a way that over- and on-ears can't dream of being. They should isolate out external noise so that you can listen on a noisy plane or street and not have to crank the volume, but still be comfortable in your ear so that you can listen for a few hours and not have your ear canals ache.

Unlike less expensive in-ears that lack low end, clarity and depth of sonic field, the \$200 price range features headphones that can rival similarly priced over-ears in terms of sound quality. Users don't have to sacrifice sonic fidelity for easy travel at this price. These are headphones for an audiophile who is always on the move. Not you? Want your ears fully covered? **Maybe over-ears for \$150 (or less!) are for you.** Want ultra high quality sound? **Maybe \$300 over-ears are for you.**

How did we choose a winner?

As always, we read a ton of reviews. Pro reviews, buyer reviews, audio blog reviews. I scoured Crutchfield, Amazon, [Head-Fi](#). Of the 45 or so models on the market, I seriously looked into around 30. I emailed professionals in the field for their picks: people like [Steve Guttenberg](#) of CNET and [Tyll Hertsens](#) of [Inner Fidelity](#). After coming across several headphones that seemed to be consistent top choices, I brought the top eight (yes, eight!) in for a faceoff. These were the cream of the crop, so choosing a winner was going to be a tall order. All our choices fell between \$149-\$250.



The faceoff panel consisted of [Brent Butterworth](#), an A/V writer with decades of experience in the field (including *Sound + Vision*, *Home Theater*, and many other publications); [Geoff Morrison](#), who has reviewed A/V gear for over 12 years for various websites as well as *Sound + Vision*, *Home Theater*, and CNET; John Higgins, a session musician and music/audio teacher at [The Windward School](#), a private high school in Los Angeles; and me, [Lauren Dragan](#), voice actor with a bachelors in both vocal performance and audio production and freelance audio writer/panelist for various sites such as Home Entertainment and *Sound + Vision*.

In a word: consistency. Every reviewer on our panel touted their sound, everyone found them comfortable, and everyone liked the lightness of their small, simple build. That universal appeal means that you can order them online without worrying that they won't work for you. Many times when dealing with in-ears what is comfortable to one kind of ear is miserable to another.

Comfort isn't the only casualty of improper fit, sound quality suffers as well. An improper fit can cause loss of bass audibility, create an overbearing treble and force the listener to crank the volume to overcome a poor seal against outside noise. So when one in-ear headphone is liked by everyone, it's a pretty exciting moment, and the RBH EP2s delivered.

Sound: Brent commented on the quality of the sound, calling it "neutral with a little bass bump" and "smoothly done." He liked the "no fuss" design and wearing them, placing them tied for his first place. Geoff also liked the bass sound, which can be tough to find in in-ears. John and I both agreed, loving the rich mids, clean highs and forward bass.

The panel was conducted thusly: all listeners used a portable audio device to assess the sound. Why? Because that's what most people use most of the time. Also, any special remote and in-cord mic options could be tested as well. I asked the panel to consider sound quality, comfort, fit, build quality, weight and ease of mic/remote use.

Until this point, none of these models had been reviewed back to back like this, and no single professional reviewer had evaluated more than two. I asked panelists to rank the headphones 1st-8th place, and discuss what made each fall in the slot it received. From there I also took the price into account to find a final victor.

Why did the RBH EP2 win?

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Bass-heads will be pleased, but the voicing doesn't overwhelm. The EP2 also have great isolation as well, so you don't need to worry about the real world leaking in while listening.

Build: The EP2s have a cloth-wrapped cord that helps keep them from tangling or snapping. They are ultra-light and stay put: I could see someone forgetting that they are wearing earbuds. Included are foam and silicone tips so you can find the fit that works for you. (As an aside, all of our reviewers liked the foam.)

EP2s have an in-cord mic and remote button that allows for easy phone calls (and depending on your phone's functions, music toggling as well). Also worth noting is this toggle works with Apple, Android and Blackberry products, so you probably aren't left out. Like many



headphones, the mic is placed lower on the cord. I had no issue with the placement for quiet calling indoors or in the car, but on a noisy street, you might want to use the included cord clip to pin the mic higher on your collar so you don't need to shout over external noise. Otherwise, you should find the call quality as good (if not better) than your phone alone. They come with a little carrying pouch that is tiny enough to fit in a pants pocket or clutch handbag. Overall, they have everything you could need in a portable headset.

Price: Here's the good news; they are not the most expensive in the bunch. In fact, at \$179, they are tied for least expensive of all the eight that were brought in for review. So with the RBH EP2s not only do you get fantastic sound and a comfortable, quality build—you get a great price.

What else is available?

In second place was the [Bowers & Wilkins C5](#).

The Bowers & Wilkins C5 have a lot to offer in sound quality.

Brent called them "acoustically flawless" with "no overt coloration." Geoff and John lauded the bass and clean sound, and I would be happy putting the sound quality of these up against over-ears in their price category. In fact, several of our reviewers commented that they might have chosen them as first had they found them more comfortable. Geoff

and I found the unusual "Secure Loop Design" to be snug and pleasant to wear; Brent and John outright hated it.

For what it's worth, Geoff and I both have smaller ears and ear canals. Regardless, this causes an issue when purchasing. If you can't try before you buy, you could find yourself with headphones that sound amazing but you can't stand wearing for more than a few minutes. Buyer beware.

In third place was the innovative [Torque t103z](#). Though not yet available for purchase (they have an expected MSRP of \$179.95) the Torque t103z has the unique ability to change filters to customize the listening experience. With purchase, the t103z arrive with flat, high pass and low pass filters, perhaps making them the first earbud with which everyone can find some appeal. And if that isn't enough, Torque will be offering even more customization later this year, with special additional filters available for purchase. The filters mount in a small metal bracket that doubles as a wrench, making changing the filter relatively simple.

Predictably, the favorite filter changed with the person. Brent liked the low pass ("deep valve") best, but said if there were one between that and the neutral ("reference valve") he'd have found a sweet spot to rival his top pick. Perhaps with those additional releases Torque will grant his wish. John chose the neutral as his favorite, finding the low pass too boomy and the high pass too overpowering. I liked the high pass ("clear valve") best, which is odd considering I generally like ample bass in my headphone mix. Geoff was the least enthusiastic, saying he liked the idea, but didn't love any of the available filters. He commented, "the right filter in the future could change my mind."

Again, fit was an issue, with John saying he felt as though the t103zs were going to fall out, and I found myself messing with the vacuum created by the included tips. Overall, the Torques are the newest kids on the block and worth keeping an eye on. That said, if you don't like to tinker with your headset constantly, stick with the RBH EP2s. Fourth place was earned by the [Denon Music Maniac](#), which won points for futuristic design but lost ground with overall sonic quality. All of our panel commented on the lower treble balance, which some liked but others didn't. Everyone agreed, however, that the fit was off: the angled shape of the ear piece made them feel as though they might fall out at any moment. This fit issue may have also accounted to the drastic difference of opinion on sound quality. John loved them; Brent and I didn't. It's a distinct possibility that improper fit contributed to our inability to hear them the way John did. It is a pity, really, as the controller is well designed. (Also: at \$250 the price is much steeper than the others.)

What else did we listen to?

Also in our panel were the well-reviewed [Etymotic hf5s](#). These are notable in that Etymotic also offers the ability to purchase custom ear molds, which generally is only offered in very expensive studio earsets. That said, the downsides are great: no mic/remote, a VERY treble heavy sound and the tips that come with them were overwhelmingly hated (perhaps purposefully?). If you are someone who likes the sound of Grado over-ears, you might find these your cup of tea sonically. The treble is crisp, but there is no bass available in the sound. Brent, Geoff and John didn't care for them at all, and I found the sound "okay" if you jammed them into your ear. But then they were completely uncomfortable and made me feel as though I had a tampon or cheap drugstore earplugs in my ears. Not enjoyable.

The [Denon Urban Ravers](#) (\$250) were a source of controversy in our panel. To be frank, the design is weird. The controls for volume and track changing are in the earpiece itself and make the Urban Ravers huge. To try to compensate for the added size, Denon includes bat-wing-like silicone pieces that fit over the earbud and wedge against the bowl of your ear. Here's the rub: Brent loved them. Despite the moniker "Urban Raver" the Denons are actually not very bass-heavy in the mix. That said, they are loud. Geoff, John and I found the high end to be too much, and none of us could get them to fit comfortably. To add to the problems, the three of us also found that when we changed the volume or track using the in-ear toggle wheel, the earbud would shift and need to be

pushed back into place. We all found it annoying to have to fuss over them constantly. So, in summary, if you are a guy with larger ears who can handle hot treble and doesn't mind fussing with your earbuds, go with the Urban Ravers. Otherwise, pass.

Next up was the [Monster Turbine Pro Gold](#). With golden earpieces and more included tips than any human could possibly desire (there are so many that Monster actually includes a sorting caddy so that you can carry your top 3 or so pairs with you) we had high hopes for these.

Sadly, when comparing the sound to the others in the panel, the consensus was overwhelmingly "meh". They weren't the bottom, but they weren't the top. Geoff attributed this to a "grainy" quality in the snare sound, I found that they lacked a depth to the sonic field that was available in the RBH and B&W. What troubled me the most, however, was that with over a dozen ear tips, two included carrying cases, an ear tip caddy and a retail price around \$210, the in-line mic is "optional." It costs an extra \$30-\$40, depending on retailer. Bummer, Monster.

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Dead last were the [Sennheiser CX 985s](#). The slide volume control is nifty. So is the hinge on the 1/8" jack. But when Brent Butterworth calls the sound a "horrible mess," Geoff says, "I could only stand to have them in my ears for a few seconds of listening," and John and I literally said "ugh!" out loud when hitting play? Probably best to look elsewhere.

What else did we consider?

- Audiofly AF78 – [lackluster Amazon reviews](#).
- Bose SIE2i – since these are considered "sport" headphones you can [refer to our article](#) where they didn't even win in that narrow category.
- Brainwavz B2 – reviews like In Ear Matters's comment on the twisty cable getting slack over time. Perhaps that's why I couldn't find them for sale anywhere at press time.
- Fischer Audio DBA-02 - [lackluster reviews](#)
- Futuresonic Atrio – Another well reviewed pair of headphones that even had an array of colors to choose from. And like the Audéos, no longer being made.
- Harman Kardon AE – CNET and [Wired](#) both said these had a "muddy low end", with [Wired](#) giving them 5/10.
- HiFi Man RE 262/252 – No longer supported by HiFi Man.
- Hisound Audio Golden Crystal – reviewed as too treble heavy and also unavailable to purchase outside of China at press time.
- Logitech Ultimate Ears 700 – pulled from Logitech site.
- Phiaton Moderna MS 200 – [overall too hot in the high end](#) there are better options available.
- Phonak Audéo PFE 121/122 and Phonak Audéo PFE 111 gold – Everyone gave these great reviews. I was so excited to hear them. But as of March 2013, Audéo is no longer making headphones and is focusing only on hearing aids. Truly sad.
- RBH EP1 – They sound the same as the winning EP2s, but have no mic/remote. Get them if you want don't need the mic feature.
- RedGiant A03 Ossicle – uncomfortable, [with a dip in the mids sonically](#).
- Rock-It Sounds R-50 – [complaints about build quality](#), and that cord tangles just by looking at it.
- Sennheiser 890i – [lackluster user reviews](#).
- Sennheiser IE 60 – on the top end of our price range with unenthusiastic user reviews.
- Shure SE315K – When [Tyll Hensens likes the \\$99 SE215k better](#), there's a problem.

- Shure SE215k – They are good 'for the price' but there are [complaints with fit and comfort](#).
- Sony XBA-3 – although the MSRP is too high for these to contend in this article, the price has dropped a lot of Amazon recently. That said, the [reviews there point out a lot of flaws](#).
- V-modà Vibrato – so so reviews, and not in stock anywhere, [including their own site](#).
- VSonic GR07 – [Breakage Issues; Limited English speaking support](#)-buy with caution

Wrapping it up

If you're someone who enjoys quality audio on-the-go, the RBH EP2s are the way to go. The reviews are stellar and we agree. They sound fantastic, they'll fit you comfortably and effortlessly, and they'll do it at a reasonable price. You'll be happy with your purchase.

Long Term Test Notes

Five months after writing our piece, we became concerned after hearing from a few readers in our comments and via email about the RBH EP2 having build quality issues (specifically, the cable separating from the connection point). Our pair has been just fine so far, but we wanted to be sure of what was going on. We contacted RBH to see how they were addressing the issue. We received the following statement:

"[RBH] places the highest value on our customer service and word-of-mouth advertising, so we quarantined that batch, and are no longer shipping product from that batch. We have remedied the problem, and have been replacing any defective sets as quickly as possible."

The EP2s have a two-year warranty, so everyone who purchased troublesome headphones are covered. If you believe your pair was affected, you can contact RBH through warranty@rbhsound.com, or the 800 numbers listed on [their website](#). And for those looking to buy and are concerned, know that the headphones you buy today do not have any known construction issues.

Brian Lam, editor here, also tested the B&Ws. He ordered a pair from Amazon and within a few hours of usage during travel the remote ceased to work. The remote is the only part of the headphone set to not be made of some ultra durable (seemingly) rubber or plastic material with the bodies themselves being metal. The return process was painless and service was wonderful. No problems here in that regard.

Sources

1. Jeff Roy, [2013 Headphone Shootout Part 2, the IEM, Stereowise Plus](#), April 30, 2013
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3. Robert Archer, [RBH Bolsters it's Headphone Lineup](#), [CePro.com](#), March 1, 2013
4. Brent Butterworth, [RBH EP1 Headphone](#), [Sound + Vision](#), August 22, 2012
5. Jamie Lendino, [The Best Earbuds](#), [PC Magazine](#), Jan 10, 2013
6. Tyll Hertsens, [The Wall of Fame, Inner Fidelity](#), March 31, 2012
7. John Sciaccia, [The In-Ear Headphone Faceoff](#), [Sound + Vision](#), December 2008
8. Justin Yu, [The Best Earbuds \(in ear headphones\)](#), CNET, April 13, 2013
9. Tai/ClieOS, [The List](#), [In Ear Matters](#), Jan 2009

Important Specs

Drive Size:	13 mm dynamic dome
Impedance:	16 ohms
Frequency Range(claimed):	14 Hz - 18 kHz
Input Connection:	1/8" jack
Warranty:	2 years
Sensitivity (stated):	101 dB
Mic/Toggle:	Apple, Android and Blackberry compatible