

Klipsch Image and Custom-3 In-Ear Headphones

Image, \$349; Custom-3, \$299

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Ours is an era where, for many music lovers, the most common “hi-fi system” of all might well be Apple’s ubiquitous iPod. But as many of you know, box-stock Apple earbuds are at best a sonic mixed bag (and that’s being generous). How, then, I have often asked myself, will members of the iPod generation ever be introduced to legitimate high-end sound? The answer, I believe, is likely to come through exposure to superb in-ear headphones drawn from the latest crop of very high performance models entering the marketplace, two superb examples of which come from Klipsch. If that last sentence conjures up somewhat scary mental images of pairs of Klipschorns dangling from your ear lobes, let me assure you that the models of which I speak—Klipsch’s new Image and Custom-3 earbuds—are quite light and physically tiny. But their sound is not.

The Image model (\$349) is arguably the smallest and lightest high-performance earbud ever made, and its sonic goodness derives in part from its electromechanical simplicity; it’s a single-armature (or what speaker folks might call a “full-range, single-driver”) design similar in concept to some of the superb designs heard in the past from Etymotic Research (e.g., Etymotic’s critically acclaimed ER-4x Series ’phones). But what sets the Images apart is not just the quality of their drivers, but also their comfort factor. Klipsch, bless its heart, has figured out something most other manufacturers have missed—namely, that human ear canals tend to be oblong and not perfectly circular in cross section. Accordingly, the Images feature patented eartips made of a soft, gel-like rubber material that are *oval-shaped*, not round. The result is, hands down, the most comfortable earbud I’ve experienced and one that almost effortlessly achieves a good, airtight seal in the ear canal.

The upshot is an earphone that offers quite high levels of resolution, reasonably neutral tonal balance shaded just to the warm side, sweet highs, an evocative and at times seductive midrange, and surprisingly deep, potent, high-impact bass (perhaps the best I’ve heard from any in-ear headphone). One point I can’t emphasize strongly enough is that the Images are so small and light, and fit so beautifully, that you all but forget you’re wearing them. More so than any other earbuds I’ve tried (and I’ve tried a bunch), the Images demonstrate the truth of this equation: good fit = great sound.

But for purists, especially those who favor strict accuracy over slightly more forgiving tonal warmth, and who really want to push the high-resolution envelope, Klipsch’s Custom-3s (\$299) are just the ticket. The Custom-3 is a dual-armature design—similar in concept to Shure’s two-way flagship SE530s—that I would classify as a true monitoring-grade in-ear headphone. The Custom-3s are slightly larger and differently shaped than the Images and for



this reason feature small, light, over-the-ear support tubes which double as wire guides and can be bent by hand to achieve an ideal custom fit. Again, Klipsch’s oval eartips come into play, helping to enhance comfort and to foster a good, airtight seal. In an absolute sense, the Custom-3s offer even higher resolution and tighter sonic focus than the Images do, and even truer (that is, more perfectly neutral albeit slightly brighter and somewhat colder) tonal balance, though depending on the day or the material being played, I could build a strong case for either one.

But the part I’ve come to love—with both models—is that these babies are well and truly musically engrossing, much as great high-end loudspeakers are.



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