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Aëdle VK-1 Valkyrie Headphones

Malcolm J. Gomes

It is easy to assign personalities to headphones. Some are sleek, slim and stunningly statuesque like a supermodel, but usually with not much substance between the ears. You get the brawny, muscular models that will take a lot of punishment without flinching but lack the elegance to be easy on the eyes. You get the loud mouths, which deliver the music not just to your ears but also to all those around you as well, whether they like it or not. You get the tiny in-ear headphones that are like wallflowers in the way they visually blend into the background so discreetly that others cannot even tell that you are wearing them. You also get the gaudy type with colours and hues that are louder than the sound they produce. You get headphones that are nerdy, in that, they can perform at very high levels but have the socially awkward personality of a wet rag. In terms of materials used, with a few exceptions, the world of headphones is dominated by cheap, plasticky models that are as flimsy as they look.

Then along comes Aëdle, ushering in something quite unique in the world of headphones with a model that answers to the name of VK-1 Valkyrie. It would not be far fetched to say that it is a work of audio art with a dual personality, in a good way that is. I have never encountered any pair of headphones that combines beauty and brawn like the VK-1 does. It is like encountering a person with the elegance and beauty of Cindy Crawford but with the brute strength, power and toughness of Hulk Hogan.

design features

The VK-1 arrived at my doorstep for the review, draped in a way that I would expect fine jewelry to be packaged. The matte black box opens to reveal the headphones nestled in a form fitting enclosure with a stainless steel card engraved with the brand name and logo on the front, as

well as the model name and identification number on the rear. Behind the card is another black box with an airline adaptor, a gold plated 3.5mm to 6.3mm stereo adapter and a detachable aramid fiber coated cable for the headphones. Embedded in the main box lid is an impeccably

tailored black padded travel pouch with a magnetic closing mechanism that allows you to carry around the headphones in style. While unboxing these headphones I distinctly felt its French heritage and it vindicated the reasons why France is considered one of the fashion capitals of the



world. The incredible attention to detail only heightens your anticipation of what the sonic performance of the headphones would be.

I had seen photos of the VK-1 prior to receiving it and was aware that it is an elegant piece of gear, but holding it in my hands for the first time I realized that the photos did not do it justice. This is truly a visually stunning pair of headphones. These headphones are available in two colours, the classic edition is silver and tan (leather) and a limited edition is carbon black. I was sent the latter.

This work of art is a real treat not just for your eyes but also for your sense of touch. The main structural parts include the 5-axis supra-aural ear cups, which are stylishly sculpted using a CNC machine, from T6066 aircraft grade virgin aluminium ingots. The headband core is made out of sturdy yet flexible manganese steel alloy that has been coated with liquid silicone. This is then cloaked in genuine full grain, smooth as silk lambskin that is hand sewn into place with the finesse that only a master leather craftsman that takes great pride in his or her work, is capable of.

This high-grade buttery soft genuine leather theme continues with the ear pads that are tailored from lambskin leather and filled with protein foam that is so pliable, it gently caresses your ears while firmly molding to their contours. I can tell you that it feels luxurious, but you have to experience it for yourself to truly understand how this pair of headphones pampers your other senses even before you give them a listen.

The unveiling of the VK-1 Valkyrie reflects the tale of how Aëdle, the company behind them, was founded in 2011 in Brittany, France. When Raphael Lebas de Lacour and Baptiste Sancho carefully handpicked the team of talented French professionals from audio engineering, industrial design, manufacturing and arts, they did it through the lens of the goal that they had set - no compromise. They are determined to employ construction material and manufacturing methods that would result in products that would represent the best in their class not just in terms of sound performance but also in sheer design elegance. It took the founders and their team two long years of intense research and development before they were

satisfied with their very first product - the VK-1 Valkyrie headphones.

Since I received a brand new unit for the review, I had to make sure it was thoroughly broken-in before the review so I plugged in the aramid fiber cable into the headphones and connected it to one of my receivers playing a jazz radio station. I allowed a break in period of 180 hours before I began auditioning these headphones.

During the break-in period I did some reading on the technology behind these headphones. I learnt that their 40mm transducers consist of titanium diaphragms and neodymium magnets to convert the signal into sound. The driver performance is further boosted by the passive bass enhancement system that is built into the ear cups. This is a closed construction configuration, which is more efficient at keeping ambient noise at bay while minimizing the leakage of sound waves that could reach those around you. This is a big advantage in public spaces, because I am no stranger to being told by perfect strangers to dial down the volume because they were bothered by my music.

On the technical side the VK-1 Valkyrie weighs 216 grams and has an impedance of 32 ohms, a frequency response of 20 Hz to 20 kHz, total harmonic distortion of less than 0.5%, a maximum input power level of 40 mW and a maximum sound pressure level of 129 dB. The manufacturer's warranty is against any material defect or workmanship and is valid for one year from the date of purchase. The recommended retail price in Canada is \$549 while in the United States it is \$499.

Aëdle got off to a great start with their very first product. Even before they started shipping the VK-1, just a few days from the time they started accepting pre-orders they were so swamped, that their first production run sold out. I have to assume that the orders were from customers that were totally enamored by the design, style and build quality of the VK-1, because they sure as heck were not able to make a judgment call based on the sonic performance as, hitherto, no full scale reviews have been published. I am guessing that customers felt that if the sound performance was even half a good as the styling and build quality, they were getting their money's worth.

performance

I therefore began the auditioning process with high expectations and I must say, I was not disappointed. First of all, these are one of the most comfortable over the ear headphones I have encountered. That smooth as a baby's bottom lambskin truly pampered my ears. They are so light and comfortable, just a few minutes after putting them on, you are quite likely to forget that you are wearing them.

I began the audition with the "Long road back from Eden" track from the Eagles album of the same name. This track is over 10 minutes long and, during an audition, I usually listen to just a few minutes of it. Not so with the VK-1. I found myself enjoying the music so much, I felt motivated to listen to the whole track. The harmonious voices and famed musical acumen of Don Henley, Glenn Frey, Timothy B. Schmit and Joe Walsh was delivered with such incredible musicality, defining it with the usual audio terms like timbre accuracy, tonal colours, width of soundstage and dynamic range extension would not do it justice. Rather the music flowed with such liquidity and realism, that it was hard not to allow the sound to just wash over you while hugging you in its emotional embrace.

The extraordinarily low noise floor of the VK-1 allows me to fully appreciate the highs, which are delicate without being too sweet. The midrange is textured and bountiful while allowing an incredible amount of air between the instruments. No headphone can replicate the thrilling physical impact of the bottom octave being transmitted through the air by loudspeakers. This is because we perceive these ultra deep bass sound waves not just through our ears but also with our whole body. In fact with the very best full-range loudspeakers we can actually feel this bass in our bones. Having said that, the bass delivered by the VK-1 has got to be one of the best I have heard from headphones in this price range. It is tight, full, deep and very tuneful.

Next, I auditioned Anjani Thomas' "The Golden Gate". Anjani has a truly golden voice with an incredible amount of texture and range. Most of the headphones that I have auditioned are just not capable of delivering all the layers of texture in



this diva's honey-toned voice. The VK-1 is different. Its superb midrange delivers this with ease.

I then listened to Greg Brown's "Where is Maria". Greg's rustic, gravely voice is an acquired taste and needs to be reproduced really well to be fully appreciated. Through the VK-1, I thoroughly enjoyed Greg's voice as well as his guitar prowess. The guitar strums are rendered with such eerie realism, it is a 'you are there' kind of feeling.

For a change of pace I listened to Serge Rachmaninoff's Symphonic Dance No.1 performed by the Minnesota Orchestra conducted by the inimitable Eiji Oue. The dynamic range on this track is incredibly wide and the tutti has an exploding crescendo that drives most headphones into very audible distortion. The VK-1 took all this in stride, sounding big as a house and as majestic as any philharmonic orchestra can sound on a pair of headphones.

I ended the audition with Arne Domnerus' "Antiphone Blues" which was recorded in the cavernous Spanga Church in Sweden. The amount of emotion that Arne can express when playing his saxophone is second to none and it is a delight to hear all that emotion through the VK-1. All the subtleties and nuances of Arne's genius on the sax come through in spades.

One thing that most headphones are not so good at recreating accurately is the soundstage. With most headphones you

get the sensation that the sound is inside your head rather than in front of you, like you experience at a live performance. Of the few headphones that do render the soundstage accurately, most of them carry a four-figure price tag. There are a precious few headphones below \$1,000 that have the ability to vividly paint the width, depth and height of a soundstage for a truly holographic sonic image and the VK-1 is one of them.

Aëdle has very thoughtfully included in its owners manual, a table that guides you on how long you can safely listen to their headphones at various sound pressure levels. According to them, at a 90 dB SPL, you can safely listen to the VK-1 for 8 hours every day. At 95 dB, that goes down to 4 hours. At 100 dB the recommended listening time is cut to 2 hours and at 105 dB, anything over one hour per day is not recommended. The table goes on to list recommended listening duration for 110 and 115 dB, but I, for one, would not recommend listening at these levels even for very short durations of time as there is a good chance of experiencing temporary or even permanent hearing loss.

To give you an idea as to how loud those levels are, Deep Purple, one of the loudest live rock bands ever, were measured at 117 dB at one of their concerts and that was loud enough to render a few people in the crowd unconscious. The fact that the VK-1 can deliver SPLs at these levels

would mean that it is unwise to let children use these headphones as they are likely to crank up the SPL to dangerous levels and permanently damage their hearing in the process.

This is not unlike allowing teenagers to drive extremely fast cars. Just as it takes a lot of maturity and control to handle the power of muscle cars safely, so too it takes maturity to use headphones like the VK-1 which deliver such high SPLs. With most ultra low distortion headphones like the VK-1, the distortions that usually cue you to the fact that the music is too loud, are mostly absent. This gives ultra low distortion headphone users, especially

children, a false sense of security, as they turn up the volume ever louder to dangerous levels that could even cause tinnitus.

At \$549 CAD, the VK-1 is not exactly cheap, but in this price range, you will be hard pressed to find another pair of headphones with the extraordinary build quality, sonic performance and incredibly elegant design of these headphones. Heck, I have auditioned predominantly plastic headphones that will probably last just a couple of years before giving up the ghost, being sold for prices that approach the price of the VK-1. Compare that to the bullet proof build quality, timeless design and enviable sonic performance of the VK-1 which, with proper care, should last a lifetime, and you are looking at a pair of headphones that offers what is probably the best value in its price range.

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