

# AKG'S NEW REFERENCE: THE K550



**T**o be honest I was never a big fan of AKG headphones. The K240 "Sextett", the K340 Hybrid Electrostatic, to the legendary

K1000. Before the K550, the K701/K702/Q701 was the latest model to represent the top-of-the-line AKG, and I was never extremely impressed with it, even when it was still one of the three hottest headphones in the market. All of that have changed with the K550. I think AKG has succeeded in creating the new benchmark of \$300 headphones. You can even take the K550 and compare it to the likes of the Sony 'sZ1000, Shure's SRH1840, or Audio Technica's W1000X and still the K550 would be very competitive.

## Sound Impressions

The new K550 from AKG sounds quite different from all the other previous AKGs released to the market. It doesn't quite share the same signature as AKG's Studio models (K240, K271 and variants), the mostly discontinued full size Hi-Fi headphones (K301-401-501-601-701), or any of their unique full size models of the past (K340, K1000). Aside from the slight housing reverb, I would say that the K550 is superior to the K701 in almost every aspect. The sound is very well balanced for music listening yet remaining quite linear and without too much coloration. Noise floor level is very low, resulting in a relatively black background and a good distinct instrument separation.

One of the first impressions I have with the K550 is that it sounds extremely clean, almost electrostats-like (sans the transients). It's definitely cleaner than the K701's, and without the so called "plastic" timbre of the K701. I also feel the K550's tonal balance to be better, having a more proper low end weight compared to the K701. The overall sound is quite laid back and I don't think it plays well with fast-paced music, but the pace is not nearly as slow as the HD650.

It's not a perfect headphone and I do think that the midrange on the K550, though quite clear and smooth, needs some additional body. I understand that adding some body to the midrange would compromise the otherwise excellent sense of clarity, and it may not go well with the overall voicing of the K550. Another thing that I would like to be added is a slightly heavier low end body. I don't think the K550 lacks bass, but it would be nice to feel a stronger slam. I don't really complain about the pace of the headphone. It's not as relaxed as Senn's HD650/800, or Shure's SRH1840, but still moderately relaxed. It fits the pace of most of my music, but I won't recommend it as a main headphone if you listen to extremely fast Rock & Metal stuff.

Despite these critiques, I do believe that it's going to be very hard for most people to not to be satisfied with the new headphone from AKG.

## Comparison to the K701

The K701 has always been a very clean sounding headphone from the first time I listened to it. Next to the K550, however, it's not even subtle how much grainier the K701 becomes. The K550 also has a much blacker background compared to the K701. The combination of zero grain and the black background puts the K550 so far ahead to the K701 that the K701 sounds very fuzzy in comparison. It's a very stark difference, and I've personally never thought that I would use the word "fuzzy" to describe the K701. I think the 701 still remains a very respectable headphone, but this just goes to show how much work AKG has put into the K550.

One of the things that I criticize the K701 for is that the soundstage, though wide and spacious, is not too accurate in its presentation. The soundstage image is vague on the K701, and the center image weak. Again in this area the K550 has improved on the 701's performance, though not quite as open sounding as the K701. The soundstage performance is solid, possessing a good amount of width and depth. It's slightly narrower in width than the K701's but with a much deeper depth. The imaging is accurate, and with a good center image and left-right soundstage coherence. The K550 may sound more closed in due to the closed-back design, but inside the soundstage performance is really an improvement from the K701.

Aside from the technicalities talk, the K550 has also improved on the tonal balance, resulting in a much better balance and musical sound. The K550 has a much better low end body, and the sound feels well planted with enough lows, where in comparison the K701 feels rather ambivalent mainly due to the lack of low end weight. Vocals are slightly recessed on the K550, but the vocals are

smoother and are much better separated from the rest of the instruments. The lack of grain in the sound also contributes for a smoother vocals, where the K701 sounds more glaring and unrefined though more forward.

Finally, on the high frequencies, the K550 was much more relaxed than the K701's relatively forward highs. The black background however, and perhaps also the better driver resolution of the K550 enables me to hear the top end treble better on the K550. It really is the best of both worlds: less glaring treble yet better extension.

## More Comparisons

Moving from the typical Sennheiser HD650/600 to the K550, it's mind blowing how much more clean the sound of the K550 is in comparison to the very grainy sound of the Senns. I've been spoiled by the bass slam of the HD600/650 and it's hard to adjust to something less than that (even my complaint with the HD700/HD800 is the same: more bass slam), but this is a matter of personal preference, and technically the K550 is just ahead of the Senn HD600/650 in so many aspects.

If Shure can charge \$700 for their grainy sounding SRH1840, the K550 is a clear steal for \$300. The Shure does sound more organic and more musical to my ears, especially with the K550's midrange making the AKG sound a tad flat at times. But when we're talking clarity and technical aspects, I would give the upper hand to the AKG.

You can take something like the HE-500 planar to try to match the K550's technicalities, but even then the AKG K550 would still be better on many aspects. The background is still blacker on the K550, the sound cleaner, and the soundstage imaging, accuracy, depth, and coherence all being superior on the K550. Not to mention that the K550 runs fine straight out of a Fiio E10. The HE-500 is still the more musical sounding of the two, in my opinion, but given the price difference, easy to drive factor, and the K550's mostly superior technicalities, it's a hard battle for the Hifiman. AKG really has struck gold with the K550.

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**Amplifier Pairing**

**O**ne area where the K550 deserves a spotlight is in the driver efficiency rating. 114dB/V makes it the easiest to drive full size headphone that I know. And that's with a 50mm diameter driver. What that means is that the K550 is almost as easy to drive as ultraportables like the PX100. Pretty amazing accomplishment from AKG in my opinion.

It does benefit from an amp, however, as the K550 is very resolving to the quality of the amplification and the source. But even more, that bass impact I was complaining about, does get better with a good strong amp. I enjoy the K550 with almost anything I use it with. From the FiiO E10/E17, the CLAS/ALO Rx Mk3-B combo (single ended), the Bottlehead Crack, to the RSA Dark Star. The Dark Star's high gain level does lead to some hiss in the sound, but otherwise it gives the grandest sound that's hard to beat with the smaller amps.

## Build Quality and Ergonomics

I think we can all agree that the K550 is one of the most handsome looking headphone in existence today. The headphone has been high on my listening list from the first moment I saw its photos. That matte black and graphite look with high quality plastic, leather earpads, and metal headband looks extremely slick. Holding the headphone in my hand, I can confirm that all the publicity photos are indeed telling the truth. The build quality is first class, and except for the faux leather pads, should be compared to the best headphones in the industry. Sennheiser HD700? Shure SRH1840? I'll take the K550's build any day. The fit of the K550 is also a big improvement over the K701. The pads rest very well, and the overall headphone felt a lot more comfortable than the K701 is. Not only excelling in terms of design and build, the K550 is also one of the most comfortable headphones in existence today. Combine that with the excellent sound, and if I was doing a point-based review, the K550 would've come out with a near perfect score.

## End Words

The K550 has received my respect from the first moment I've listened to it. Burn in time was very brief, and in a matter of hours the bass cleared up and I was hearing the K550 in its best form. I can tell immediately that it was an improvement from the K701 as I've never remembered the K701 sounding so clean and with such a black background. But it was not until I went and did a direct comparison with the K701 that it really occurred to me how far the new AKG is from its predecessor.

While I've never been a big fan of the K701, it was mostly due to sound signature and I've always acknowledged it as having a very solid technicalities in the \$300 price bracket. I may have described the K701 as being ambivalent and lacking musicality, but I never really associated it with words such as fuzzy and grainy. And yet, next to the K550, the K701 becomes just that: fuzzy and grainy. It was more open sounding, but the much improved instrument separation on the K550 made the K701 sounds like a vintage headphone. I think these comparisons with the K701 should give you an idea of how much of a better headphone the K550 is. I can't even imagine the price tag being \$300 as I can imagine the K550 competing with Shure's new \$700 SRH1840.

At the end I just want to congratulate AKG for bringing such a technological leap into their new headphone. The K550 should be on the list of everyone looking for a new \$300 headphone. I can't praise it enough, and indeed this review is definitely the most positive review I've written on an AKG.

## Gear Used for Review

Source: Ipod Classic, Cypher Labs AlgoRhythm Solo, FiiO E10, FiiO E17, KingRex UD384, Altman Tera Player, HRT HeadStreamer, HRT iStreamer. Amplifier: ALO Rx Mk3-B, RSA Dark Star, Bottlehead Crack, JDSLabs C421 Headphones: AKG K550, K701, Sennheiser HD650, HD580, Hifiman HE-500



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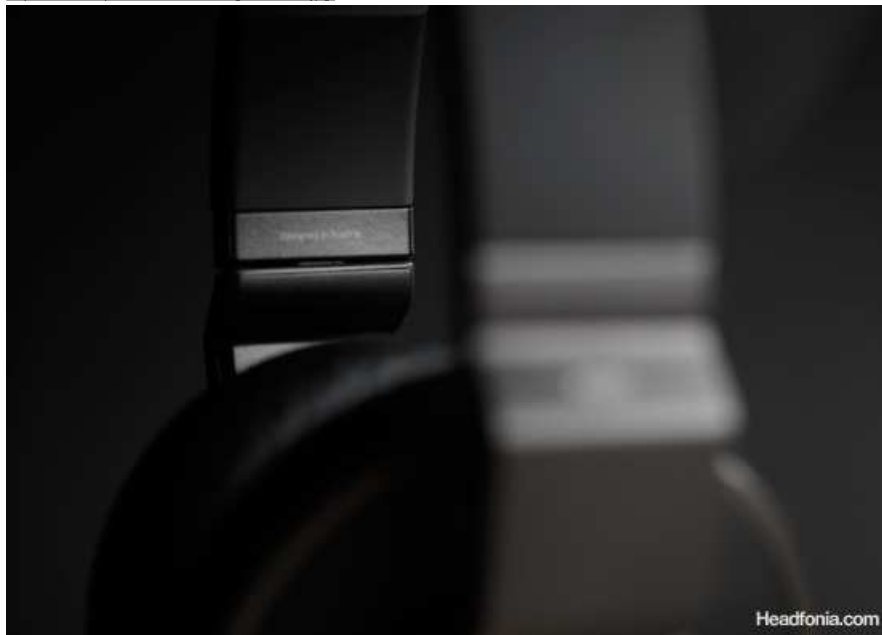
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