

"It sounds really good," she said.

"It does."

Trying hard not to cry, I gave my girlfriend a hug, took a look around, and caught myself thinking: *Now I have everything.*

Except bass! Our new room is about twice the size of my old listening room and significantly more *live*, with greater reverberation. I doubt there's much more I can do about that without riling Ms. Little and the cats, but I *will* experiment with speaker placement, perhaps play with a subwoofer, probably say some prayers. In the meantime, headphones will have to do.

I made sure to pack Harman/Kardon's CL on-ears for my trip to Tennessee.

Harman/Kardon CL on-ear headphones

Harman/Kardon makes headphones? Who doesn't these days? According to a recent Facebook post, even my mom is making headphones. (Just kidding, ma. I *love* that you're constantly on Facebook.) The cynic in me sees this as a shameful attempt by audio manufacturers to follow the money. The headphone market is undeniably hot, so we

find even the oldest-school hi-fi brands jumping in. Then again, maybe there's more to this than basic greed. I know of at least one reputable speaker designer who recently entered the headphone market because it posed a challenge as much as an opportunity: Could he translate his vast knowledge of loudspeakers into a successful headphone design? Might he, in his attempt, even have a little *fun*? And what's wrong with capitalizing on an opportunity? Isn't that the American way?

For its part, Harman/Kardon sees entering the headphone market as a matter of course—a pragmatic business decision made to fulfill its customers' needs and desires. "The way in which [people] consume music has changed in a big way over the last several years," explained H/K's senior director of global brand marketing, Christopher Dragon. "Portable devices and the ability to take content on the go has become a prime use case. As a result, Harman/Kardon felt the time was right to enter the category and deliver our sonic signature with headphones."

Fair enough. Dedicated H/K

customers might jump for a headphone from their favorite brand, while guys like me, who've never spent quality time with the venerable brand, can use the headphones as a point of entry. Plus, it's cool that H/K can change with the times.

Can Harman/Kardon change with the times? Actually, H/K might have a better chance than most at designing a successful headphone. After all, H/K's corporate parent, Harman International, also owns AKG, which began making headphones in 1949—long before Dr. Dre was born. While Christopher Dragon acknowledges that H/K took advantage of AKG's proven research and development, he's quick to point out that “These are not AKG headphones rebadged.” In fact, he says, the H/K headphones have their own unique sound, tailored for the H/K customer.

Who is that customer? According to Dragon, Harman/Kardon headphones are designed for the music lover who wants an engaging, natural sound, but who might also like a little *oomph*. “While [H/K headphones] have great



Harman/Kardon's CL headphones match classic design with modern sound.

bass, we drive to develop headphones with great tonal balance throughout the entire frequency range.”

Did somebody say *bass*? Mmm . . .

Currently, Harman/Kardon's headphone line comprises five models: two sound-isolating in-ears, two over-the-ear models, and my choice, the CL on-ear design (\$199.95). CL stands for “Classic.” I like that. It means no Bluetooth, no active noise canceling, no batteries required, no fancy colors, no gimmicks. The overall look is simple, understated, and purposeful: The CLs' largish, rectangular earcups have smoothly contoured plastic outer shells and soft, comfortable leather earpads, the latter held in place by magnets. The earcups intelligently and securely lock into the CLs' outer headband of sand-blasted steel, which, while durable and rigid, easily expands to accommodate the user's noggin. A leather inner band provides additional comfort. The design is reminiscent of AKG's old K-1000 “earspeaker” though nowhere near as bulky or nerdy. Still, when wearing the CLs on the train to work, I felt a little self-conscious: These aren't the most discreet headphones on the market.

Speaking of discretion, unlike 'phones that have folding headbands

for ultracompact storage and portability, the CLs' band is fixed. Instead of folding up, the CLs simply slip into a tall, thin carrying pouch. Ms. Little was *not* impressed.

Christopher Dragon told me that the CLs were designed for comfort, but I found the fit a bit tight. The headphones are packed with a second, extra-large outer band, but while this better fit my extra-large head, it looked absolutely ridiculous. Even the cats laughed. Call me superficial, but I wouldn't be caught dead wearing it on the street. Switching the outer bands, however, did give me an opportunity to admire the CLs' solid, intelligent industrial design. I can't imagine these things breaking easily, if at all. In look and feel, the H/Ks are somewhere between the Beats Solo HD (\$199.95) and the Bowers & Wilkins P3 (\$199.99), which I compared last month—not as elegant or luxurious as the B&Ws, but easily more mature and sophisticated than the Beats. I haven't touched the Beats since I finished writing that column—their sound was too colored, too congested, too boomy for my taste; the B&Ws, however, have been constant companions.

The first thing I noticed about the CLs' sound was that it was *big*—full-bodied and present in the best possible way. Halle Berry! It had all the low-end impact of the Solo HDs, but added transparency and detail. About 25 seconds into “Money Trees,” one of my favorite tracks on Kendrick Lamar’s awesome new album, *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* (CD, Top Dawg/Aftermath Entertainment 1753602), the bass enters. Hard. It’s supposed to make you move, screw up your face, squint your eyes, sway your head. It’s funky, exaggerated, raw. The Harman/Kardon CLs got this right, and did so without muddying the midrange or losing their grip on the rhythm. The music flowed steadily and easily, never sounding confused, cluttered, or congested. Hallelujah: I’d found bass.

The same track through the B&W P3s sounded veiled, distant, too polite. They got the point across but missed the soul. Still, the B&Ws excelled at re-creating a sense of space: I heard greater separation between Lamar's lead and (overdubbed) backing vocals, and the B&Ws' smooth, airy highs were admirably sweet and delicate. But while I appreciated the P3s' delicacy, I was consistently drawn to the CLs' more forceful, authoritative, full-figured sound. Best of all, the H/Ks' careful balance of fine overall transparency and excellent low-end weight and impact not only benefited hip-hop and electronic music, it worked well with everything I played, from Ornette Coleman to Sonic Youth to Erik Satie. Ultimately, music through the CLs was more *alive*—which made them the headphones I reached for first.

If only the Harman/Kardon CLs were a tad smaller, sleeker, more luxurious. If only they looked and felt exactly like the B&W P3s. Maybe *then* I'd have everything.