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Cardas A8 earphones

by Alan Sircom

This is Cardas's second run at making an earphone (or as Cardas puts it with some justification, an 'ear speaker'): the first being the 'mostly excellent' EM5813. The A8 is a very different prospect, however.

What it shares with its older brother is the 'ear speaker' concept. The single, full range driver is designed essentially like a tweeter in a conventional loudspeaker, replacing the pole piece in the driver with a second magnet to reduce eddy currents. There have been some developments in the intervening years too, and not just in the move from an 11mm to a 10.85mm diaphragm. Cardas refers to this new driver as an Ultra Linear, Contour Field, Dual Magnet driver system.

Although both enclosures are made from brass and share a similar basic layout, the big external difference between the two models is the older design was copper

plated, while the A8 has a blue rubberised ABS coating. The other big – make that huge – difference is in the choice of cable. The new tightly braided blue fabric-wrapped copper 85cm long cable is extremely strong, extremely flexible, and almost immune from conduction noise. This cable is not part of the Clear range (as its sourced in China alongside the rest of the A8, rather than extruded from Cardas own forge in Oregon) is nonetheless working to the Golden Ratio so important to Cardas and is wound in a helix pattern. The big advantage is the cable connects to the headphone pair in a 3.5mm jack, like full sized headphones. This makes it very easy to swap cables, between a regular audio system and the two-jack balanced inputs for the Ayre Codex, A&K, or Pono. Theoretically at least, other connections could be possible. The A8 comes in a nice presentation box, which includes a small hard carry case and not enough ear tips; just a set of small, medium, and large triple-flange tips. Replacement triple-flange tips and Comply foam tips are available, though.

Earphones are inherently designed for music on the move. They need to be snug fitting to drown out the world around the listener, and have no tendency to fall out on the go. They need to be efficient and forgiving, because they will probably end up connected directly to a smartphone and all that implies. And they need to be fun, or you will simply forget them and leave them somewhere. ▶



“The A8s have become my first choice for commuting.”

- Fortunately, the A8 does all these things, and does them well – better than its predecessor.

The A8 is one of the most direct, most grain-free performances you’ll find this side of a custom IEM. You can listen to the purest voices you can think of – Maddy Prior and June Tabor’s delicate Silly Sisters harmonies, for example – and any reduction in the purity of the voice comes down to the microphone, not the other transducer.

Bass is perhaps the A8’s strongest suit. Not in the Beats more bass than you can stand style, but honest, deep, meaty bass that is at once precise, tuneful, and harmonically rich. It’s more Ernest Ranglin than Deadmau5, in that it plays Ranglin’s *Surfin’* [*Below The Bassline*, Island] with a perfect – and correct – blend of jazzy reggae basslines, never once tipping over too far in either direction. It’s fast bass, too; in fact the whole earphone starts and stops extremely quickly, and in Pace Rhythm & Timing terms the A8 ‘plays a tune’.

Alongside the deep bass, there’s a subtle, sophisticated midrange, more about detail and honesty than fireworks and energy, and a top end that occupies the Goldilocks position of being not too bright, not too rolled-off... just right! Under a lot of comparison listening – especially against known custom in-ear benchmarks – there is a subtle accenting of upper bass and lower treble, but this seems to just add to the enjoyment factor of the A8s overall performance.

But breaking the sound up into individual components – although great for audio reviewing, runs counter to what the A8 actually sounds like. It’s an extremely coherent, integrated sound, which always makes you think of instruments being played rather than a collection of frequency bands. This applies universally, but also works at volume. If it works with ‘Statesboro Blues’ from *At Fillmore East* by The Allman Brothers Band [Mercury] played at a fair lick, and it works just as well with string quartets, and orchestras alike, it’s clear the A8’s top-to-toe coherence is something special, irrespective of price tag.

Perhaps as a result, the Cardas A8s are deeply satisfying for long listening sessions, and that’s something very few earphones can do. This is perhaps the ultimate arbiter of the quality of the Cardas A8; the the A8’s ability to just plug into the music and stay there perhaps best describes of a set of earphones that are simply enjoyable to listen to. I long-hauled it with the A8s, using my own music and the in-flight entertainment and I never felt the need to remove them, except for feeding time (I tried once without removing the A8’s thinking I could get away with “I’ll have the chicken, please!”, but the flight attendant was handing out ice creams at the time).



The A8s have become my first choice for commuting. That cable is so incredibly rugged it feels like it should be wrapped around the shoulder of a mountaineer. The earphones themselves are efficient enough to work with a smartphone, but are more than deserving of higher grades of DAC and headphone amp, and they sound great with the Chord Mojo, too.

More importantly, the Cardas A8 is a great value earphone for those who’ve grown out of boom and tizz. You’ll need to shop around for better tips if you want to know just how good these earphones are (especially in the bass), but draft in the right tips for you and you are rewarded with a sound that will make you wish your morning commute was longer. Highly recommended! +

PRODUCT DETAILS

Price: £279

Optional cable price: £49

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