

M-AUDIO IE SERIES

IN-EAR PHONES

by Francis Preve

Stereo in-ear monitors

PROS

All three models deliver stellar sound at an outstanding price. IE-20 XBs have remarkably accurate low-end reproduction. Sound quality rivals top-of-the-line buds costing much more.

CONS

Some people may find IE-20 XB's larger size a bit dorky-looking.

IE-10, \$129.95; IE-20 XB, \$249.95; IE-30, \$299.95

M-Audio
www.m-audio.com



VITAL STATS

SPEAKER TYPE

Precision balanced armature (IE-10), precision balanced armature and dynamic driver (IE-20 XB), two precision balanced armatures (IE-30).

CONNECTOR

1/8" gold-plated, 1/4" adaptor with IE-20 XB and IE-30.

NOISE ISOLATION

26dB (IE-10 and IE-30), 16dB (IE-20 XB).

CABLE LENGTH

46", detachable and replaceable.

WEIGHT

0.5 oz. (IE-10), 0.7 oz. (IE-20 XB), 0.6 oz. (IE-30).



IE-20 XBs and 30s come with (from left to right) hardshell case, alternate earpieces, cleaning tool, 1/4" adaptor, level limiter plug. IE-10s have the earpieces but not the adaptor, limiter, or case, and all three models ship with a leatherette pouch as well.

In-ear monitors are able to deliver surprisingly high sound quality because of the isolation they provide from environmental noise. This is just as good for live performers who want better clarity and no feedback as it is for critical listening in the studio. Moreover, the design itself alleviates many of the hassles associated with traditional headphone cans, such as bulkiness and leakage. Advances in miniature speaker design allow for true audiophile quality in a size close to that of the consumer ear buds we use with our MP3 players.

M-Audio has released three models of professional buds. Before we tackle the specifics of each, let's take a look at what comes standard in every box.

STANDARD ACCESSORIES

The shape of your ears is as unique as your fingerprint. Accordingly, every IE model comes with a variety of earpieces. Like Goldilocks, I tried different ones until I found a good fit. There's also a tiny tool for cleaning the buds every so often.

The IE-20 XB and IE-30 models come with an in-line attenuator/limiter plug to keep loudness peaks under control. You don't have to use it, but here's why you should: Ear buds sit closer to your eardrum than cans, so a bit of classical bombast or an electronic climax can produce enough sound pressure to potentially damage your hearing. Kudos to M-Audio for helping to prevent this, as I was able to do at a DJ gig where I had split the signal from my laptop using a Y-cable, and needed the house level much higher than my own monitors. Aside from a

CLAIM CHECK

M-Audio says, "Employing the latest in precision balanced armature driver technology, the IE series professional reference earphones combine full frequency response with superior isolation for extraordinary detail and tonal balance. They incorporate acclaimed Ultimate Ears technology — the same industry standard that has revolutionized live performance monitoring. They're ideal for use in live performance as well as critical listening for all types of music on the go."

touch of distortion due to the high volumes, the attenuator reduced the level enough for me to do a set without blowing my head off. All three IEs also come with a leatherette carrying case.

IE-10

The IE-10s feature a single-driver (one speaker) design like most commercial headphones. While positioned as "entry-level," they're much more than upscale replacements for consumer buds. The overall character is wonderfully smooth. They're a smidgen bright, but not shrill by any means. Lows aren't lacking, but you may be surprised at how balanced lows really sound at first. Unlike speakers, which can move enough air to vibrate your whole body, in-ears provide strictly cochlear stimulation. If I had to compare the IE-10s to an actual speaker, I'd say they sound similar to a good set of nearfields with 5" or 6" woofers.

IE-20 XB

This middle model offers several upgrades. First, they're a dual-driver design, which means there are separate treble and bass drivers inside each phone, like most studio monitors. Second, the "woofer" in the XBs has an extended low frequency range. Third, in order to reproduce lows with both clarity and punch, they're physically larger than either the IE-10s or 30s. Overall, their character reminds me of a popular monitor speaker for hip-hop and dance music: the Mackie HR-824. Big warm lows paired with slick, silky highs are more than enough to offset the inevitable stares as you rock the stereo-fied Lieutenant Uhura look.

IE-30

These dual-driver ear buds are like high-end studio monitors for your head, with sound quality rivaling in-ears costing more than twice as much. Technical editor Stephen Fortner agreed, commenting, "I never thought I could mix with any earphone anywhere near this price, and I've also been using them for nitpicky evaluations of keyboard sounds." Lows are beautifully balanced and full, without being boomy. I'd actually recommend a lower-end model if all you want to do is listen to MP3s, because the highs are so detailed and accurate that the data-compression artifacts in anything less than a full-size AIFF or WAV file glow like radioactive waste. For mission-critical pro use, though, the IE-30s will rock your world.

CONCLUSIONS

I used all three models in every conceivable situation, from mixes in which the IE-20s and 30s translated beautifully to monitor speakers, to DJ sets where I received compliments and questions about the IEs, since they all look hi-tech and sexy in person. Having lived with the IE series for a while, I can honestly say that I will never go back to regular headphones for any of my mobile work, period. Laptop producers, DJs, and anyone who uses headphones regularly, absolutely must check out the IE series in-ears. I was utterly blown away, and everyone at *Keyboard* agreed they were a clear Key Buy winner. ☑

Francis Preve is a remixer and producer based in Austin, Texas. Recent projects include remixes for Gabriel & Dresden, Jacinta, Amber, and others. Get the full scoop at www.fap7.com.