

Luxury à la Japanese

The three in-ear headphones from Japan's high-end maker Final Audio offer great quality – in design and also in sound. In both cases they work with utmost discretion.



Author: Alexandros Mitropoulos

Bushido is the Japanese term for "the way of the warrior". Samurai fighters, who had left a deep mark on the country's history for centuries, regarded the Bushido as the only true way of living. This attitude to life, which was influenced by the Buddhist and Shintoist religions, did not only teach the warriors values such as loyalty and sincerity, but also the devotion to beauty and perfection: magnificently decorated armours dating from this epoch or sword handles refined with silk illustrate this in a particularly splendid way. But upon closer examination we can notice a cultural feature of this people which does not only find expression in the Samurai world, but also in the present Japanese society: you don't buy luxury goods to show off with others, but rather for your peaceful private enjoyment.

This credo is obviously followed by Japanese high-end maker Final Audio Design with the three top models of their in-ear range. For the slightly maverick design of the Piano Forte VIII, IX and X predestines them for home use. Silicon caps like with the majority of conventio-

nal models are not seen in the three Final models. The headphones are kind of anchored in the ear canal, but without sealing it air-tight. Hence they sit surprisingly fixed in the auditory passage – but as I said before: people in Japan prefer to enjoy luxury rather at home, and this is where the Final models are definitely in the best hands.

But before examining the technical construction of the in-ears in detail, we should take a look at Final's company history (see also info box on the right-hand page), because the manufacturer, who is yet relatively unknown over here, has been in existence for almost 40 years. Founded back in 1974 by acting CEO Kanemori Takai, their first products were made for vinyl lovers: an MC cartridge, the matching and indeed impressive "Parthenon" turntable as well as a pre/power amp combo.

But sound transducers, too, were still to follow in the years to come. Their best known product is probably the "Opus" – a loudspeaker which, tipping the scales at a ludicrous 800 kilogrammes per piece (!), was almost as heavy as a Japanese house – and nearly as big.

After this excursion into the macro-

cosm, the new millennium saw Final orienting towards the other side of the spectrum: in cooperation with connector and cable giant Molex the first in-ear headphones were developed. With their products Final relies on two driver technologies: besides the very compact "Balanced Air Movement" driver (abridged: BAM), some models also have dynamic drivers (which thus function like small loudspeakers).

The Japanese also make use of the latter technology with the three Piano Forte models which feature some specialties that clearly set them apart from the competition. First we spot extra large diaphragms with a diameter of 16 millimetres in the housings. Other manufacturers mostly assemble eight to max. 12 millimetre models.

True, a larger diaphragm surface area means a deeper bass, but can also lead to an imprecise sound in the worst case. To counter this Final placed a special ring on the edge of the diaphragm which optimally controls the driver's transient and decay phases and thus ensures a time correct reproduction. The whole construction has a flow-optimised design. Small ducts with differently sized vents



The first creations of the Japanese were serving primarily vinyl fans: the first line-up comprised an MC system, the "Parthenon" turntable and a pre/power amp combo. The Opus loudspeaker went to the mat with a fighting weight of about 800 kg and ought to be the best known Final product.

located on the rear side regulate the air pressure inside the housing. The result: the drivers can move freely, which benefits above all the highs and thus also imaging and transparency.

When designing in-ears, manufacturers normally aim to achieve a fit as tight as possible by using silicon plugs. And since the radiation angle of the headphone will not change that way, its sonic finetuning is thus greatly facilitated. But as mentioned above, the three Piano Forte models rest more or less loosely in the ear channel. In order to realise still a well-balanced sound, the complete front part of the housing acts as a funnel-shaped acoustic guideway like it's basi-

cally used in horn loudspeakers, too. With the Finals this mini horn design compensates the loose fit and the resulting radiation angle.

Consequently the Piano Forte VIII, IX and X use identical drivers. So what's the difference between them? Well, quite obviously the housing material. The Final VIII has a hand-milled brass housing with a matte surface, which I like best for its visual appeal (but that's a matter of taste). The Piano Forte number nine has a garment of shining stainless steel, while the Roman number ten – the top model – features a reddish shimmering copper-chrome mix.

All three headphones present them-

selves with a flawless workmanship which is proportionate to the price. Impressive is also the Japanese love for detail in the packaging that's laid out with traditional Washi paper (a noble Japanese material). But the real winner is the round storage box, which has been carefully handpainted using an artificial patina and therefore looks like an antique. However, the feature list of the Piano Forte models ends with the no-twist cable. But that doesn't matter as the listening test revealed.

For the natural and balanced reproduction of all three Finals made possible question marks vanish in a twinkling. Aspects such as the loose fit (which >

The housing of the Piano Forte VIII is made of brass with a semigloss instead of a polished finish.

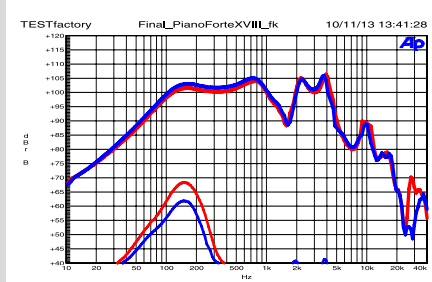
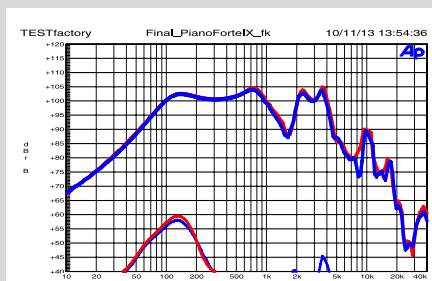
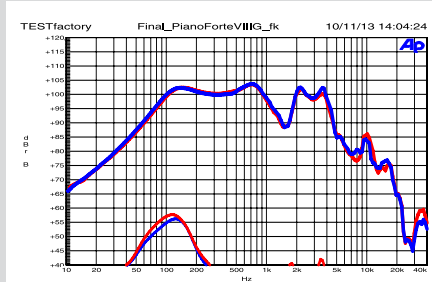
With its shining stainless steel housing, the Piano Forte IX could also pass as ear studs.

Only the Piano Forte X can surpass its siblings visually. Its body is made of copper-chrome alloy.



The differently sized vents on the rear of the housing are responsible for airing the interior. Thus the dynamic driver with its 16 millimetre diaphragm can move freely, since the air pressure is regulated inside.

Frequency Response



The frequency response charts of the three in-ears must be interpreted with caution since they use a hornlike design, as opposed to conventional models. But the characteristic curve of the Piano Forte VIII (see diagram on top) confirms with an early treble drop-off the slightly warmer sound discerned in the listening check. Models IX and X have almost identical measuring specs, whereby a tiny peak at 15 kHz should give the Piano Forte IX a bit more freshness (see centre diagram). The three headphones have an impedance of ca. 18 ohms so that they get along well even with mobile amps and portables. Extremely high sensitivity of 115dB – certainly to be credited to the hornlike construction.

”

In-ears: for headphone fan Mitropoulos a broadband character is a must.

“Splendid timbres, laid-back resolution and authentic imaging with perfect workmanship”

was by no means loose, but surprisingly tight) or the steady-state application suddenly appeared like petty banalities. But the truly amazing fact, from the reviewer’s perspective, was that the three little ones – despite their identical drivers – revealed sonic differences. Quite clear: the body material had a formative effect on the sound of the in-ears.

For instance, the Piano Forte VIII impressed with its warmer character that gave voices a teasingly intimate touch: Rebecca Pidgeon’s interpretation of “Spanish Harlem” (Chesky) had a lot of melliflousness over the Final VIII that triggered a pleasantly hilarious feeling like a gulp of the very finest Ginjo saké.

And while still enjoying this, one could notice soon after the wealth of details in the vigorous guitar arpeggio: picking noises of the strings and other acoustic by-products, which all play an important role in this audiophile recording, came into their own and rounded out the overall picture of the Piano Forte VIII.

The next in size, the Piano Forte IX model, surprised after the first few bars of the “Vagabundenlied” (from Lisa Bassenge’s album Wolke 8) with an extra dose of freshness. This, however, didn’t lead to a more present rendition of the upper frequencies as expected, but rather emphasised the open character of the silvery shimmering Final IX: the rough

wind players on “Kpafuca” (Rhythm is Love) by Keziah Jones were scoring with the necessary share of brass in their tone, and voices showed a perfect presence within the band context – even in a tad more hectic passages. Stereo effects and the stage were also imaged with greater precision than over the little brother. One could simply detect more information, the rendition had more depth and on balance the IX appeared to have more airiness. Yet both the semigloss Piano Forte VIII and the silverling with the bib number nine had one thing in common: they definitely turned out to be no bass fetishists. Okay, the two of them could easily transmit lower frequencies (with a perfect fit) and also deliver a good low-end, but they kept a level head and performed the lower floors with a rather slender tone. In direct comparison, the top model of the Piano Forte range came down to business more bravely:

Over the Forte X the bassdrum on R.L Burnside’s “Let My Baby Ride” (Come On In) had so much authority that you were inclined not to raise just one, but both eyebrows. Very cool: in spite of this

energetic input in the lower register, the ritzy in-ear from Japan always sounded accurate and neutral. Far off from any gimmickry, it appeared to be tonally the most consummate.

But the real kicker was beyond doubt the Piano Forte X’s talent to render the stage – especially with audiophile acoustic recordings like “If I Could Sing Your Blues” (again from Chesky’s demo disc) – in a realistic way. True, its two siblings were already able to recreate this impressively, yet the top model simply put on that famous extra log on the fire. Because what came out of the earphones, was sublime hifi fare: even minute details, hidden in the depths of the recordings (like e.g. early room reflections, captured by the microphones) were reproduced with total truthfulness by the in-ear.

However, all three Finals have one common virtue: despite their wealth of details and superb precision they always play balanced and never pretentiously or even swaggeringly. If you will, they also follow the teaching of the bushido, striving for a life in total harmony and perfection, as is probably still customary in the land of the rising sun.



Demo CD
David Chesky
Ultimate Demonstration Disc

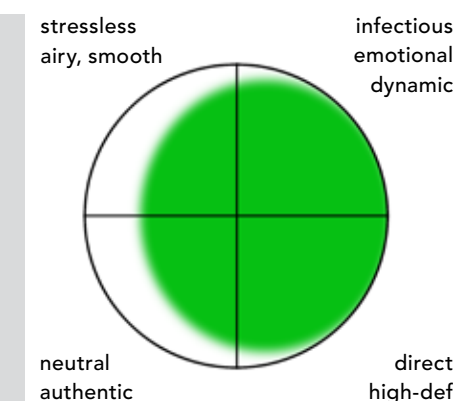
Chesky’s Demonstration CD simply belongs into every record cabinet. Organised like an ear training course, the music samples shall convey a sense of the tonal and dynamic balance of recordings.



The Author
Alexandros
Mitropoulos

Enjoys music listening provided the sound transducer – headphone or loudspeaker – plays neutrally and dynamically. The AUDIO editor has admittedly a faible for active speakers – but he won’t say no to passive coaxes running on a valve, either.

AUDIophile Character



AUDIophile Potential



AUDIophile Advice

Who is in the market for a luxury in-ear with superb workmanship and a nuanced, breezily-fresh sound, should definitely check out these three Finals.



The Japanese in-ear headphones come with a very pretty box laid out with noble decorative washi paper. The box of the Piano Forte X even steps up the game with a traditionally styled woven doily. With their storage boxes the Japanese also spared no effort, for each item is hand-coated with artificial patina.

Final Audio Design Piano Forte VIII, IX, X

List price:

1000 / 1400 / 2900 EUR

Warranty: 2 years

Weight: 32-35 g

Finishes: VIII: semigloss brass,
IX: polished stainless steel,
X: polished copper-chrome

Distributor:

Sintron Vertriebs GmbH
Südring 14

D-76473 Iffezheim

Phone:

+49 (0) 72 29 / 18 29 98

Internet:

www.sintron.de