

REVIEW



Fluid Audio Focus

Affordable headphones with a virtual mixing system powered by dSONIQ

REVIEW BY ALEX HAWLEY

Fluid Audio is best known for its coaxial speaker designs, but its product lineup has been growing in recent years. Between the recent Image 2 monitors (reviewed February 2023), the Axis microphone (June 2022), and the SRI-2 interface/monitor controller, the Fluid Audio team has been on a roll as of late. On review today is the company's first on-ear offering—the Fluid Audio Focus headphones.

Overview

The Fluid Audio Focus headphones feature a semi-open over-the-ear design for tracking and mixing. The price point is extremely attractive at \$69, and includes a special edition of dSONIQ Realphones virtual mixing software.

Focus features 50mm neodymium magnet drivers, gold-plated connectors and a response ranging from 20 Hz–20 kHz. Fluid designed Focus to yield a balanced and articulate response, even without dSONIQ Realphones in the mix. And with a 32-ohm impedance, Focus is ready for use with any device, including consumer-level devices for casual listening.

The build quality is excellent for the price, with a sturdy plastic chassis and metal components. The wire-frame headband is a one-size-fits-all solution that auto-conforms and adjusts easily to your head. This Focus is nicely malleable if you need to throw these in your bag for traveling, and I can't identify any weak points you'd need to watch out for.

I could have used a bit more *head-room* (sorry, pun intended) on my fit, but I have a larger head than most. The ear cups are firm but not quite deep enough to fully enclose my ears without touching them. There's a bit of pressure while wearing them, but nothing dramatic.

The sleek black finish sets off the blue Fluid Audio logo for an attractive aesthetic. The cable length is a generous 3 meters (or ~10') with a 1/8" connector, but a threaded 1/4" gold-plated adapter is also included. Worth noting that the cable is not detachable from the chassis.

Realphones by dSONIQ

The Realphones software by dSONIQ is designed to provide the experience of mixing in a treated control room on studio monitors through a combination of linear headphone correction and speaker/room emulations. Realphones allow you to "season" the amount of correction and reflections in the virtual space to taste. Mix-check sources are also available, such as car stereo and nightclub.

Realphones can run as a plugin or as a standalone system-wide app, allowing you to stream or play anything through the virtual mixing room. Nicely, the system-wide app shows up as a dedicated playback engine for Pro Tools, which I found more convenient than mixing through a plugin.

While you can purchase the full Realphones suite for \$179, the included streamlined Fluid Audio edition includes an exclusive mixing room outfitted with Fluid FX50, FX80 and Image 2 monitor emulations.

In Use: Standalone

Before diving into the software, I wanted to "focus" on the Focus headphones sans any processing or correction. Focus reproduces a full and punchy sound with an overall balanced response. The tonality leans slightly to the warmer side of the spectrum, with a subtle emphasis around ~150 Hz and a forgiving top-end beyond the ~8 kHz range. The midrange is articulate and detailed.

It wasn't long before I was mixing with confidence. These headphones are a good reminder that you can accomplish high-level work without breaking the bank. I enjoyed the semi-open design—my first time using headphones of this style. There isn't much bleed, so I wouldn't hesitate to use Focus while tracking, as long as the musician isn't blaring a click track.

Focus is comfortable during long mixing sessions, but after a few hours, the tightness I mentioned caused a bit of physical fatigue. It's good to take regular mixing breaks anyway, so I didn't see this as an issue.

In Use: Realphones

Realphones is jam-packed with options—various rooms, environments and tonal settings. There is a correction slider to dial in more or less of the linear headphone correction, environment percentage (wet/dry for the room IR) and overall brightness.

I preferred using the standalone version, as similar plugins have burned me in the past when I forget to bypass them before bouncing. The system-wide app also made it easier to A/B my current project with mix check material that I know well as a way to get more familiar with the Realphones sound.

Having just reviewed the impressive Image 2 a few months back, I was curious to try the virtual representation along with the other rooms and setups. The results were a mixed bag. To start, there is a bit learning curve similar to learning a new pair of monitors—time is necessary to understand the sound, feel and response of Realphones and get your mixes to translate to other systems.

Part of what made it challenging for me is the abundance of speakers, rooms and tonal range. Bouncing between the many choices had me chasing my tail and second-guessing my instincts. I found it much more productive to create and stick to a single setup/snapshot.

That said, it's less about being a 1:1 emulation of a specific set of monitors and space, and more about recreating the sensation of being in front of actual speakers rather than



in headphones. I pulled off the Focus headphones more than once to double-check that my monitors weren't actually on in the background!

Wrap Up

The Fluid Audio Focus is a solid entry into the headphone world. They are well-built and provide a balanced response for mixing and tracking. The bonus of the included dSONIQ Realphones software offers even further perspective for your mixes making for a great bundled package at an amazing price. ➡

Price: \$69 **More From:** fluidaudio.com