Equipment report

FINAL AUDIO DESIGN PANDORA HOPE VI HEADPHONE

our definitive and final look at Final's definitive headphone

by Chris Martens | Aug 15th, 2014

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The Japanese firm Final Audio Design has been creating high-end audio products since 1974, and has—for the past two decades—been actively working to produce extremely high-performance earphones and headphones. For this review, we will focus on Final's recently released, mid-priced Pandora Hope VI headphone (£699.99), which, relative to earlier and more costly Pandora models, stands as something of a Pandora for Everyman.

What's in a name? According to myth, Pandora (whose name means 'the one who bears all gifts') was the first woman on earth, created by the Gods to be the bride of Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus. The irony is that the Gods created Pandora as both an irresistible gift but also an instrument of punishment for mankind. The Gods, angry that Prometheus had given man the gift of fire, sought to punish mankind by sending with Pandora a special box (Pandora's Box)—which supposedly contained gifts from the Gods, but that came with a solemn warning that the box was never to be opened. Despite the warning, Pandora, who was innately curious, eventually opened the box and out flew all the woes, illnesses, and evils that presently afflict mankind. In the end, only one gift remained in the box and the name of that gift was Hope. Obviously, Final Audio intends for this headphone to bear nothing but good musical gifts, so that it will bring hope to each new listening session.

Relative to its competitors, Final Audio marches to the beat of a different drummer, presenting itself first as a 'music-centric' company and only secondarily as an engineering-driven firm—a worldview that permeates most everything the company does. In practical terms, Final Audio regards audio technology as a means to an end (not as an end in itself) where the objective is to achieve consistently superior (that is, more stirring and emotionally fulfilling) listening experiences.

Accordingly, Final Audio measures the results of its design efforts using explicitly music-minded 'yardsticks', asking question like the ones I've sketched here. Does the product convey the sweep, flow, and structure of the music? Does it render textural and dynamic details in an engaging and moving way? Doe it capture both the power of big dynamic swells as well as the delicacy and nuance of quieter passages? Perhaps most importantly, does the product invite listeners to savour the sense, sensibilities, and emotional content underlying all great music? These are the kinds of questions the Pandora Hope VI is meant to answer in the affirmative.

Before delving into the Hope VI's sound, let's a take a brief technical tour to see what makes this headphone fly. Where most headphone designers pick one core drive-unit technology and stick with it, Final Audio has in the Pandora Hope VI opted to create a hybrid design that combines a 50mm dynamic-type mid-bass driver with a balanced armature-type tweeter. The dynamic driver uses a lightweight diaphragm, a voice coil formed of copper-clad aluminium, and a motor assembly featuring a neodymium magnet and a narrower-than-usual voice-coil gap; the design is said to offer "high magnetic flux density" and to yield "clear sound quality." The dynamic driver is mounted in a minimalist, low-resonance frame and is said to provide "a light vibration system" coupled with a magnetic circuit that offers "high driving force." In turn, the Pandora's fast and responsive balanced armature-type driver has been specifically optimised for use as a tweeter, using Permalloy materials with "a high level of permeability in the magnetic circuit."

Like many of Final's dynamic-driver-equipped earphones, the Pandora use BAM (Balanced Air Movement) technology to balance "air pressure at the front and rear of the diaphragm" with the aim of "achieving three-dimensional sound with depth and low tones." To this end, the hybrid driver assembly sports a 1.5mm-thick ventilated aluminium backing plate that helps achieve "air pressure balance" and also helps "in the suppression of unnecessary vibrations." Finally, the Pandora is supplied with a high quality detachable signal cable that features twist-lock fittings on the plugs that connect the cable to the Pandora's left and right ear cups.

Surprisingly, the Pandora Hope VI is a closed-back headphone, which seems an unusual choice given the majority of today's most expressive and transparent-sounding headphones are open-back designs (although Audeze's recent, planar magnetic LCD-XC is perhaps the exception to this rule). Nevertheless, Final has pressed forward with its closed-back design, which uses ear cups made of a combination of spun stainless steel (for the main housing) and very high-quality, matte black-finished ABS plastic ear pad flanges. The result is a finely finished black-and-silver headphone that looks as if it might have rolled off the kind of assembly line used to produce top-shelf cameras.

The Pandora Hope VI arrives in a distinctive hexagonal case with flip-open side panels and an interior lined with a thick, soft faux fur material. The faux fur looks so realistic that your first reaction might be to think, "Oh Lord, the PETA folks are going to throw a fit once they see this," but happily no animals were harmed in the making of the Pandora or its case, meaning you can enjoy both with a clear conscience. Trust us on this point: this is one Pandora's Box you'll actually *want* to open.

But how does the Pandora Hope VI sound? If I had to supply a three-word summary of the Hope VI's sound, the words I would choose are vivid, evocative, and expressive. One significant factor at work involves the fact that the Pandora Hope VI is very sensitive (more so than its specification would suggest) and thus does not require a terribly powerful headphone amplifier to give of its best. However, the Hope VI is so revealing of details, textures, and dynamic shifts in the music that it fairly begs to be used with high-quality source and amplification components capable of maximising the Pandora's full sonic potential.

To hear the Hope VI's vivid, evocative, and expressive qualities in action, listen to a well-made recording such as Steve Strauss' cover of the Bruce Springsteen song "Youngstown", from Strauss' *Just Like Love* [Stockfisch, SACD]. On this track, which is chockfull of musical details, the Pandora gives an almost 'zoomed-in' rendition of the recording, presenting every inflection in Strauss' earthy voice as well as the textures, tonal colours, and dynamics of supporting instruments in a remarkably gripping and lucid way, making each musical thread easy to follow. But at the same time, the Pandora also manages to convey the sense of an uncommonly broad, deep, and expansive soundstage. On 'Youngstown', high harmonics and reverb tails seem to extend almost indefinitely, giving a sense of terrific openness and space. This ability to reproduce subliminal spatial cues in the music is one of the Hope VI's greatest strengths.

For further examples of the Pandora's sonic prowess, try the title track—"Confronting Inertia: For Trumpet and Piano"—from John Adler's *Confronting Inertia* [Origin Classical]. I like to think this track would have made the late, great Miles Davis smile, because it expertly captures the pure, colourful, and profoundly contrasting voices of Adler's trumpet and Tracy Cowden's piano as heard in a pleasingly reverberant space. The track features, in particular, Adler's trumpet presented in an angular, probing, and expansive piece in which the trumpeter explores, at times, his horn's upper registers and most if not all of its available dynamic range. Played way up high, and sometimes quite loudly, the trumpet can be very tricky to reproduce as the line between 'appropriate brass bite' and outright edginess and glare becomes an exceedingly fine one that is all too easy to cross (with potentially painful consequences for the listener).

But impressively, the Pandora stayed just in bounds on ‘Confronting Inertia’—conveying the at times biting attack of the horn, but without veering into a hot, glassy-sounding, or overwrought presentation. It also kept pace with the horn’s fiercely dynamic passages as well as its quieter and more pensive moods (as in, say, Miles Davis’ *In A Silent* Way). The result is a composition whose stark, angular, and penetrating beauty lingers long after the music has ended (or at least it does when you listen through these Final Audio headphones). The Pandora’s performance on this piece is doubly impressive when you consider that this is precisely the sort of material that can trip up some balanced armature driver-equipped earphones. Stated another way, the refinement of the Pandora’s design shows not only in the many things it does well, but also in the sonic pitfalls it manages to avoid.

I should caution listeners that, heard straight form the box, the Hope VI can produce a sound reminiscent of the taste of an overly young Cabernet Sauvignon; in short, it seems full of promising sonic flavours, but with some rough edges and a certain lack of smoothness, cohesiveness, and finesse. But with these headphones as with fine wines, time changes everything. As the Pandoras accumulate run-in time there eventually comes a point—with our sample this occurred around the 20-25 hour mark—where those promising but disparate sonic flavours suddenly began to coalesce and converge toward one beautifully cohesive voice—a voice full of top-to-bottom articulacy and focus, with impressive expressiveness and clarity from the lower midrange on up to the treble region. Once run-in has done most of its work, the Hope VI exhibits a predominantly neutral tonal balance, but with perhaps a subtle hint of a midrange-forward character (happily, this gentle touch of midrange forwardness reads more as ‘superior midrange vividness’ than as any sort of overt colouration).

With our Pandoras, this sonic metamorphosis seemed to unfold fairly rapidly once it commenced, so that the headphone’s sound was transformed over the course of playing just two or three albums late one evening. At the beginning of the session I was still acutely aware of hearing two disparate types of drivers at work, but by the end of the sessions the drivers had begun to speak, for the most part, with one coherent voice. What is more, over the course of subsequent hours of listening, I found the Pandora’s sound gradually continues to improve and evolve. Thus, superb though the Pandora’s sound is at present, it may get still better over time (in which case a follow-up review may become necessary).

Final Audio Design’s Pandora Hope VI is one of the most musically expressive headphones in its price class and for this reason it is one I turn to early and often when seeking richly detailed and intensely engaging listening experiences—not to mention the benefits of those characteristically large, expansive soundstages. I recommend the Pandora Hope VI enthusiastically, subject only to the caveat that listener’s must be patient in waiting for the headphone’s true sound to emerge during the run-in period. But know this; it is unequivocally worth the wait!

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Final Audio Design Pandora Hope VI

Type: Hybrid dynamic driver/balanced armature driver-equipped closed-back, circumaural headphone.

Driver complement: 50mm dynamic-type mid-bass driver and balanced armature driver tweeter.

Maximum SPL: 105dB

Impedance: 16 Ohms

Frequency response: Not specified.

Weight: 10g

Price: £699.99

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