

AWARDS 2015PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYERS **AWARDS 2015**

Portable music players

The dedicated portable music player may seem a bit of a difficult sell, but that's only until you hear one as good as this...

**PRODUCT OF THE YEAR**

Best portable music player

Astell & Kern AK Jr £400

Let's get the peevish over with first. They're hardly numerous, after all, so here they are. For a portable music player costing £400, the AK Jr doesn't have a particularly bright, particularly high-resolution touchscreen. And while it's an aluminium-hewn slice of high-quality engineering, the Astell & Kern's frame is needlessly pointy and sharp. And, um, that's about it. In every other respect (and in one fundamental respect in particular), the AK Jr is everything we want in a music player.

Slim enough (8.9mm down to 6.9mm thanks to the tapering design) and light enough (93g) to be truly portable even if it's just being stowed in a shirt pocket, the AK Jr is a tactile object. Ergonomically it's sound - the 3.1in touchscreen is nobody's idea of the cutting edge, but it's home to a logical and responsive interface. Its specification is on the money too: its Wolfson DAC can handle high-resolution audio files (a wide range of files, what's more, including DSD) up to 24-bit/192kHz, and the 64GB of internal memory can be boosted by up to twice that by slipping in a microSD card. Bluetooth 4.0 is on the menu as well, so streaming to a suitable system or to wireless headphones is possible.

That's all well and good, but why should you choose the AK Jr when our Award-winning Samsung smartphone (p42) has the same high-res audio ability and a screen you could never describe as 'dim' or 'low-resolution'? The answer's pretty simple: the AK Jr leaves the Samsung more-or-less for dead when talk turns to sound quality.

Richly communicative

Playing a 176.4kHz file of Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean*, the Astell & Kern is a crisp, substantial and wide-open listen. Dynamics (both high- and low-level) are strong, cohesion and integration entirely convincing. The songs is timed immaculately by the AK Jr, the deathless bass-line prompt and unhurried, while the midrange is detail-heavy and richly communicative. The overall presentation is brisk, poised and as forceful as it needs to be.

If you're a high-res advocate, you will find the AK Jr just the ticket. And if you're still to be convinced, stick a decent pair of headphones into this player and prepare to be converted.