

GEAR & GADGETS

By MATTHEW KRONBERG

MANY OF THE fine details captured in a music recording—the textured cascade of hand claps in Chic’s “Le Freak” or Billie Eilish’s breathy inhalation before she begins each verse—rarely make their way to your ears. To blame: low-quality audio streams or equipment too crude to reproduce such sonic subtleties. Happy to shell out massive bucks to hear every nuance, audiophiles have been known to spend more than \$1,000 for earphones from Campfire Audio, more than \$10,000 for amps from Shindo Labs or upward of \$20,000 for speakers by Bowers & Wilkins.

Unsurprisingly, much of the hi-fi gear designed and sold by such U.S., Japanese and European brands—the sort that now dominates the market—is built in China. But in the past few years, a wave of inscrutably named Chinese companies have begun to design and market their own audiophile-grade equipment that can often outperform their better known, better marketed rivals, usually doing so at a fraction of the price.

If there’s a poster child for “Chi-Fi”—a moniker for this constellation of equipment that’s largely made up of earphones, headphone amps and high resolution digital-to-analog audio converters known as DACs—it’s the ATE model in-ear monitors, or IEMs, from a nearly anonymous brand known as KZ (*kzacooustics.com*). IEMs are essentially earphones that extend slightly into the canal, like a hearing aid. John Darko, who runs darko.audio, an audiophile website out of Berlin, declared that the KZ ATEs offered an “immensely spacious and dynamically charged listening experience,” not the kind of praise you typically hear about gear that sells for around \$15.

What’s the catch? That path to the audiophile Promised Land is still a confusing, poorly signposted one. The Chinese audio gear market is overflowing with confusingly named startups like BQEYZ, GGMM, UiiSi or FAAEAL, none of which likely resonate with the average U.S. consumer the way established brands like Sony, Beats and Yamaha do. And since very little of this alphabet-soup of gear makes it to traditional bricks-and-mortar retailers where you can listen before you buy, experts like Mr.



BOLDIRON

Brand Unawareness

No-name audio devices from China can output better sound than big-label gear. But locating these ‘Chi-Fi’ alternatives has been a unique pain—until now

Darko, and tightly curated e-commerce sites like Drop.com, are essential tools for aspiring audiophiles. This is especially true when the product in question is a \$250 DAC rather than a \$15 IEM.

Of the products submitted by Chi-Fi brands for possible sales on Drop, “We only list about 20%,” said CEO Steve El-Hage. “The rest don’t pass our evaluation criteria.” Beyond filtering out knockoffs of well-

known gear, that evaluation process, he said, includes objective and subjective testing. His testers ask: Does a piece of gear match the specs and performance claims on the box? Drop sometimes goes so far as to send its employees to the makers’ factories and offices in China to verify production capacities and methods before a brand’s wares can be included alongside the blue-chip brands Drop often carries

like Sennheiser, Koss and JVC.

“Overall, Drop is the legitimizer of a Chi-Fi brand,” boasted Mr. El-Hage. “We’re generally the first enthusiast platform to work with a given Chi-Fi brand, and there’s a big difference in broader brand perception when you have a page on Drop.”

Drop’s online community discussions are also worth perusing, not just for reviews of gear, but for deeper debate on the vagaries of

Chinese hi-fi. While commenters rarely dispute Chinese brands’ price advantages over mainstream rivals—the result of supply-chain efficiencies and nonexistent marketing budgets—they will call out Chinese manufacturers for producing gear that too-closely resembles equipment from well-known companies.

Such critiques strike a familiar chord with Jonathan Halpern, who has dealt in audiophile gear for 25 years, the last 17 with his own distribution company, Tone Imports. Just a few decades ago, he recalls, Japanese audio equipment was derided

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as shoddy and derivative, with legitimate criticism tainted by racially charged language. But, said Mr. Halpern, over time Japanese brands evolved from derivative to innovative, and are now widely considered to produce some of the world’s best high-end audio equipment. Many of these Chinese companies could be following a similar course, he says.

Today, Mr. Halpern distributes gear from the likes of Shindo Laboratory, a Japanese maker of pricey amplifiers, but also represents China’s Line Magnetic (see: “Heard Mentality,” below). Line Magnetic is still a niche player in the world of stereo equipment, but it’s beginning to make high-profile appearances, most notably at Bar Shiru, an Oakland, Calif., hi-fi and cocktail lounge that lets its patrons experience true audiophile sound as they imbibe. So clear is the sound filling the room that if you close your eyes while sipping a highball there, you might think for a moment that a reincarnated Miles Davis was in the room blowing his horn.

Bar Shiru’s system was designed by one of the establishment’s owners Adam Wexler, by day a broker of vintage audio gear from upscale makers like Klipsch and McIntosh. Even though they “put a very decent budget toward the sound,” he said, creating an audio promised land on an upstart’s budget is no easy task. And without Line Magnetic, “we could not have achieved that.”

HEARD MENTALITY / FIVE CHI-FI DEVICES TO CONSIDER INSTEAD OF PRICIER AUDIO EQUIPMENT



KZ ATE In-Ear Monitors

The lightweight resin body of each KZ ATE monitor nestles in the curve of the ear, with a soft-capped tip to help block external noise. The ATEs have a remarkably expansive soundstage with precise imaging—nerdspeak for conveying a sense of being in the same space as the musicians. About \$15, kzacooustics.com



SMSL SU-8 DAC Decoder (top) and SH-8 Headphone Amplifier

The SU-8, which offers 10 tone settings, can squeeze every last bit of detail out of a digital signal without a jitter. The SH-8 headphone amplifier has both XLR and RCA inputs, and 6.35mm and XLR headphone jacks. SU-8 about \$250, SH-8 about \$190, smsl-audio.com



Tin HiFi T4 Earphones

This latest set of Tin HiFi earphones features 10 mm carbon nanotube dynamic drivers. The Mid-range tones sound organic and distinct, and the bass thumps without turning muddy. The braided cable and the leather carrying case all give the T4s the look and feel—if not the price—of a luxury product. \$109, linsoul.com



Line Magnetic 805iA Amplifier

It may be stretching the limits of credulity to call an amp that lists for \$4,995 a bargain, but listen to the pair powering Line Magnetic’s LM-812 speakers at Bar Shiru and you’ll understand this amp’s value immediately. It generates sound as warm as the orange glow emanating from its tubes. \$4,995, toneimports.com

Sun in Aquarius, iPhone Rising

As trendy apps expose many to astrology, old-school zodiac fans aren’t signing up

ASTROLOGY TAKES ‘DESTINY’ and gives ardent believers something to attribute it to—or to blame it on. Didn’t get that promotion you obviously deserved? At war with a partner? Mercury *must* be retrograde.

Now, rather than sitting for a reading or waiting for a magazine, finding your horoscope is as simple as downloading an app—and the ease and thoroughness of zodiac apps is attracting a curious, if skeptical, set of new users.

One of the most popular is **Co-Star**, which according to the brand has been downloaded by 15% of American woman age 20 to 24, and counts 7.5 million registered users as of January. You enter your birth date, time and location and the app calculates your specific birth chart, shedding light on your passions and predilections. Co-Star also shoots you a daily insight, and gives you guid-



READING INTO IT
For \$20 a month, Sanctuary’s app offers readings with real-life astrologers.

ance in the zones of Self, Spirituality, Social Life and Work. You can even connect with contacts in the Co-Star community to share and compare readings. (*Free, costarastrology.com*)

“My boyfriend showed me a picture of him as a baby that had his birth time. I just plugged it into Co-Star and showed him how compatible we are,” said Katie Burke, an Aries who checks the app daily. So far, at least, their stars have aligned.

Sanctuary, newer to the astrology app market, has an A.I.-driven interface you interact with as if texting with a friend: The bot sends daily notifications and you can respond in a chat window to gain insights about everything from its predictions to your “power emoji,” ranging from a moon to high heel. Its \$20-a-month upgrade includes an option to message with Sanctuary’s human astrologers. (sanctuaryworld.co)

Meanwhile, creators of the **Pattern** app consider it a social network for understanding yourself and others. Daily notifications lead users to “Go Deeper,” delving into fears and anxieties, instincts or relationships. (*Free, thepattern.com*) “It doesn’t really influence my actions but it creates a sense of order,” Ms. Burke said of the apps. “It’s a more digestible narrative to my life.”

Many who are more serious about astrology are unconvinced. Liz Tillman, an HBO associate marketing manager who grew up around shamans and a great aunt who saw ghosts, and who believes her failed romances can be chalked up to her fate as a Taurus, doesn’t suggest astrology apps. She believes they lack connection to the robust history and mystery of astrology.

“These apps are making an algorithm out of astrology which has developed over thousands of years,” Ms. Tillman said. “Astrology, much like religion, gives people a framework for understanding the world around them.” That’s precisely what you’d expect a Taurus to say. —Haley Velasco



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