

Sennheiser RS 180 Wireless Headphone (Playback 33)

A Darned Good Headphone—Without Wires

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Source: Playback



All other things being equal, I'd guess most of us would rather have wireless than wired headphones. It is pretty obvious that cords get in the way, cords require you to remove headphones to get up and find an old CD, and cords restrict your dance moves. Of course, cords are so much a part of headphones that we don't think about the limitations they impose. Sennheiser has, however, thought about it, and they've produced a broad range of wireless designs—ten different designs in all, to cater to various budgets and tastes. Are these a valid alternative to their wired brethren?

Consider this wireless headphone if: you crave the freedom of wireless headphone listening and want a balanced, low coloration sound.

Look elsewhere if: you want the last word in clarity and bandwidth, or if you prefer to fine-tune your headphones via amp selection.

RATINGS (relative to comparably priced wireless headphones)

Treble: 9

Midrange: 8.5

Bass: 8

Soundstaging: 10

Dynamics: 8

Value: 10

FEATURES

The Sennheiser RS 180 under review here is the top of Sennheiser's RS line of wireless headphones, and seems to be the model most oriented to accurate musical reproduction. The RS line uses RF (Radio Frequency) wireless signals to transmit sound from a source (CD player, iPod or PC with DAC and line out) to the headphones. Sennheiser claims that the RS 180s work up to 100 meters from the transmitter (a small vertical box that sits next to your source). In practice, I found the RS 180s worked up to about 75 feet, which is still substantial in the context of normal rooms.

The RS 180 wireless headphone system utilizes Klear's uncompressed digital wireless audio transmission technology, operating at 2.4 GHz. The transmitter can serve up to four pairs of headphones, so you can listen to movies or music with friends. The transmitter module also serves as both a headphone stand



and charger. The input to the transmitter is analog, via a supplied cable terminated with RCA male connectors. The connector on the transmitter is a 3.5mm stereo mini jack, so you could also connect the line out of an iPod with the appropriate cable or docking station.

The RS 180 headphones themselves have controls for mute/power, volume and balance, so that you don't have to return to base for these adjustments. The controls are on the right earcup, and seem to have been designed without reference to actual human bodies. The buttons are on the bottom of the earcup, which pretty much forces thumb operation (or contortionist use of the right hand fingers). But even my smallish thumb was much larger than the buttons, making accurate operation a bit difficult. Not only that, but the combination mute/power button is between volume up and volume down, which invites scenarios where you accidentally silence and/or turn off the RS 180s, when in fact you wanted to raise or lower volume. Recognizing that the power button also doubles as a mute button makes its position seem more logical, but even so I'd rather have it in a different place. After some use you get more adept at running the controls, but they require more thought than is ergonomically ideal.

Incidentally, we asked Sennheiser to comment on the placement of the RS 180 controls and here is their reply. "The button layout was placed where it is after years of feedback from customers who used the RS 130 and RS 140 and complained that when leaning back in an easy-chair, the volume knob hit the chair and was raised or lowered without the user desiring the change. Although the layout is on the underside of the headphone, it best prevents the controls from being accessed accidentally."

While on the subject of ergonomics, I found the earcup design to have moderate pressure and good long-term comfort. The headband, however, is a bit stiff and needs to be readjusted periodically.

Okay, enough hardware description, already—what about the sound?

SONIC CHARACTER

Let's get right to it: these are pretty darn good headphones, wireless or wired. Unlike many headphones, the RS 180s sound basically balanced across the broad frequency range. By that I mean that bass, midrange and treble are presented at roughly even levels in comparison with live music. Many headphones have an obvious bass or treble boost, or a big dip somewhere in the midrange. Sometimes this is euphonic, sometimes not, but in any event the RS 180s avoid these issues.

Treble smoothness is the second aspect of the RS 180's performance that I found laudable. Cymbals are rendered cleanly with good definition. Vocal sibilants are kept in check, too. I would say that upper treble is somewhat down in level, but this is far from the worst coloration you'll hear on headphones (including those costing many times what the RS 180's do).



I think most people would also enjoy the bass that the RS 180s deliver. Mid-bass is ample without being bloated and string and drum definition is quite good. You don't get the sense that the lowest octave is as strong as the rest of the bass range, but like the upper treble, this probably won't be of maximal consequence for many listeners.

In the midrange, I liked the RS 180s better than many other Sennheisers. Balance within the midrange seems mostly even, and this is key. Vocals sound smooth with a level clarity that won't have you wondering why things sound muffled.

With all those good qualities in mind, the RS 180s don't strike me as state of the art. At this price, you shouldn't expect that, but it may help to know how they deviate from perfection to determine if they're likely to be your cup of tea. First off, the RS 180s aren't the most vivid or dynamic headphones you'll hear. You get the feeling that you're listening to music through a thin, almost unnoticeable veil. This is usually a function of limited microdynamic depth. You also get the

feeling that the headphones are holding back a bit to avoid losing control. It reminds me somewhat of the difference you hear between a good headphone amp and a great one. The balance mostly remains the same, but on the great amp everything just seems more "there" without any deleterious side effects.

I'd also say that the bass performance could offer more definition and clarity. You might not notice what's missing, of course, until you listen to better (and likely more costly) headphones, because the RS 180 bass is quite good.

The great thing about these Sennheisers is that you have to look to find the flaws—they don't hit you over the head. And with a list price of \$379, which for all intents and purposes includes a headphone amp, the RS 180s offer a good value. Grado (SR 325is) and AKG (K 702) offer headphones at around this price point on the street that are quite different as well as very good (more midrange focused, more vivid). Shure offers a less expensive and superb headphone

(SRH 840), which has broad similarities to the RS 180s. But all these headphones need an amp, so the price difference isn't what you might think, and in some cases favors the Sennheisers. And of course none of these conventional headphones is wireless.

MUSICAL EXAMPLES

On Shelby Lynne's "You Don't Have a Heart" from *Suit Yourself* [Capitol], the drive and punch of the rhythm section comes through pretty well and instrumental separation is good. Vocal and guitar clarity is slightly shaded.

On "Times Like These" from Jack Johnson's *On and On* [Universal], the bass is warm without covering up the rest of the mix at all. The bass has a good sense of air, with some loss of definition and depth. On "Gone" from the same album, the cymbals sound clear and very clean, but there is more sense of "stick" and less of "shimmer" than one would hear live.

On the power pop in "No Good in Goodbye" from Jewel's *Sweet and Wild*, the whole mix seems slightly distant. You can hear each instrument well, which is impressive, but you can't hear into all of the music's subtleties.

On Paavo Jarvi's brilliant rendition of the Beethoven Third Symphony [RCA Red Seal], the orchestra has lovely warmth, with bass and cello admirably balanced against the active yet smooth strings. The definition of instrumental lines is also well preserved. The only issue you might have is that the hall sound is a bit diminished.

BOTTOM LINE

The Sennheiser RS 180s have fundamental sonic strengths and relatively subtle weaknesses. As such they would be very competitive with wired headphones in their price class. Since they add to this sonic package the undeniably useful wireless feature, they must be considered a special value.

SPECS & PRICING

Sennheiser RS 180 Wireless Headphone

Frequency response: 18 Hz – 21 kHz

Transducer: open, dynamic

Ear coupling: circumaural

Impedance: 32 ohms

Weight: 204 g

Signal-to-Noise Ratio: 85 db

Wireless Range: 100 m