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Bowers & Wilkins P5 Mobile Hi-Fi Headphones

DAN FRAKES AND XAVIER VERHOEVEN | MAY 31, 2010

British high-end-audio manufacturer Bowers & Wilkins (B&W) has been making speakers for over 40 years, but it's only with the P5 Mobile Hi-Fi Headphones, released this week, that the company has ventured into the field of private audio listening. Offered as a set of premium, full-size headphones for mobile listening, the \$499 P5 is pricey, but it's an impressive product that's worth a look if your wallet can handle it.

One look at the P5 makes it clear this isn't a budget product: each earpiece is made of brushed and polished aluminium; the earpads and trim are made of luxuriously soft New Zealand sheep leather; and the sturdy, polished-metal headband is cushioned by thick, leather-covered padding. Nice.

The sexy black and aluminium look alone should be enough to woo most Mac connoisseurs. But there is much more to these headphones than looks alone.

The P5 comes bundled with two 4ft cables: a basic cable for using the headphones with any audio device

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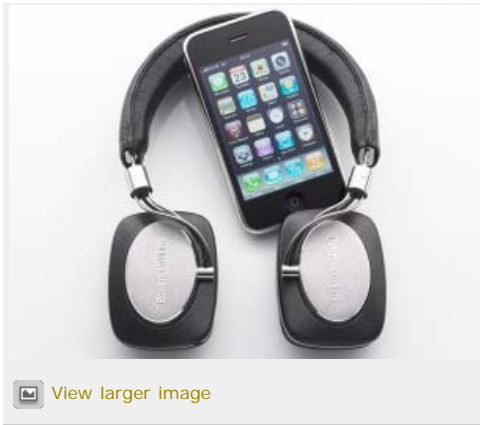
sporting a 1/8in minijack, and a cable with a microphone/remote module for use with an iPhone or iPad, a recent iPod, or a recent iMac or MacBook. The mic/remote module is an Apple-approved three-button version, letting you control playback as well as volume level, and a modular design lets you easily swap between cables or replace a bad one — a welcome feature for anyone who's ever had to buy a new set of headphones because of a loose


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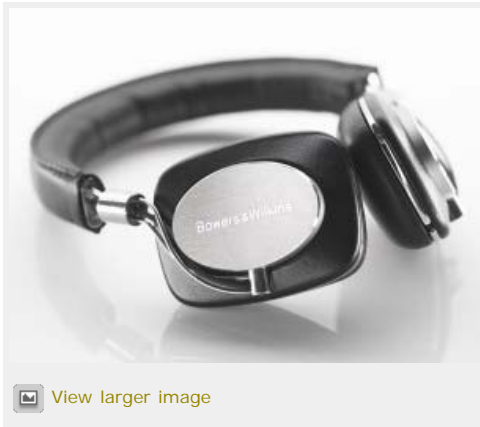
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Bowers & Wilkins P5	
Convoy	www.convoy.com.au
Pros	Great design; excellent sound quality; sturdy and well-built; light and portable
Cons	Earpads can get warm on your ears; fit may not suit everyone
RRP	\$499
Rating	



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connection.

But the unique way in which the cable connects may make such replacements unnecessary: instead of putting the cable jack on the exterior of either earpiece, where the connector could be subjected to strain, Bowers & Wilkins put the connector inside the left earpiece. It turns out that the P5's comfy earpads are also replaceable, held in place by small magnets; each earpad pops off with a firm pull, revealing a 40mm Mylar-diaphragm driver. Behind the left earpad is a cable groove that winds through a couple of turns to reach the connector deep inside. This design, along with a tiny cable grip near the bottom of the earpiece, keeps the cable from putting strain on the connector, even if the cable gets pulled or snagged during use. (The design also gives the P5 a cleaner look, as the plug and jack are hidden from view.)

The P5 also comes with a padded carrying case — the P5's earpieces fold flat for travel — and a 1/4in adapter for connecting to a home stereo system. Replacement earpads and cables can be purchased separately. But given the sturdy design of the headphones, we're not sure you'll need to rely heavily on the case or be replacing the earpads any time soon.

At-home sound, portable design

One of the unique aspects of the P5 is that despite being a set of full-size, high-end headphones, the P5 is aimed squarely at portable use. In addition to the fold-flat design, short cord, 1/8in miniplug, and iPhone mic/remot module, the P5 is easy to drive: unlike many full-size headphones, which require more juice to sound their best than an iPod or computer headphone jack can provide, the P5 was engineered to sound great directly out of a portable source. The P5 also has a low profile on your head, and, despite its sturdy construction and materials, weighs less than 200 grams.

Oh, and did we mention the noise isolation? Even though the P5's earpieces sit on your ears rather than completely surrounding them, the super-soft earpads block an astonishing amount of external noise when properly positioned. In Xavier's testing, they compared well to a set of Bose noise canceling cans (Quiet Comfort 15, also \$499) — even on a flight. Of course, the P5s still let some of the aircraft hum through, but they pump a beautiful sound through the drone without needing to crank the volume to dangerous levels. Though they could also go much louder than the Bose set if that's what you're in to. There's also the added advantage of not needing to replace the batteries like in noise-cancelling options.

The impressive blocking of background noise is likely a result of the tight fit of the headphones. And while Dan thinks they're uncomfortably tight, at least at first, Xavier (and his above-average sized head) doesn't agree: without the firm grip of the P5's headband holding the memory-foam-filled earpads on ears, it might feel like the P5 is dangerously close



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to falling off. If your noggin's a bit bigger than most, be sure to test the fit before buying — or purchase from a retailer with a good return policy, just in case.

It's also worth noting that the leather earpads can get a bit warm during long periods of use, which is great coming into winter, but may not be ideal for the summer months.

If you like the P5's fit, you'll be rewarded with audio that's as luxurious as the headphones' craftsmanship. The solid acoustic seal makes for great bass response — visceral and powerful but tight and natural-sounding, with relatively flat extension down to approximately 60Hz. Midrange and treble response are also very good, although those with golden ears may find that detail is not quite as clear as with the best-sounding \$500 headphones out there. The result is a warm, rich sound that's easy to listen to for hours at a time and fits the P5's portable-listening focus well. (One tip: The P5's sound quality varies noticeably with the position of the earpieces on your ears; a minor adjustment can really improve sound quality.)

Of course, you won't be able to fully appreciate the P5's audio capabilities if your iPod or iPhone is filled with low-bit rate music — the P5 can't make 128 kbps pop tracks sound like lossless or higher-quality MP3 recordings. Xavier's preference for high quality variable bitrate tracks running through an iPad made for great listening, and everything from Angus & Julia Stone's acoustic tones to the thumping drums of a Tool song sounded natural and detailed.

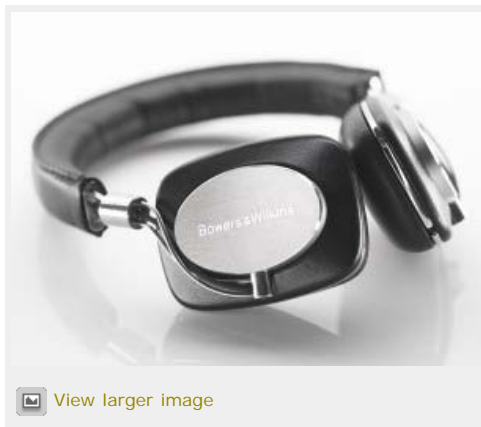
At the same time, it's also worth noting that if sound quality is your primary concern, and you don't need the P5's portable-friendly features, there are a number of great \$500 full-size headphones out there, especially if you do most of your listening at home with good amplification. These are upscale *portable* cans.

Finally, and it seems like almost an afterthought, the P5's voice performance is also good: People we talked to on our iPhones said the sound was clear and relatively natural, and we could hear them clearly — the P5's noise isolation was especially helpful here. The only drawback to the P5 in this respect is that the earpads provide such a solid noise-isolation seal that you can experience a mild occlusion effect when talking (you'll think you sound a bit odd, and probably speak much louder than necessary).

Australian Macworld's buying advice

B&W's P5 offers full-size sound quality and outstanding passive noise isolation in a truly portable headphone. While a good chunk of the \$499 price tag surely goes towards the P5's design, the result is much more than an attractive appearance: the P5's construction, comfort, swappable components, and compact size add utility and long-term value. And while there may be similarly priced headphones that can best the P5's impressive audio performance, the ones we've seen are either in-ear options or ill-suited for portable use — they're bulky, require better amplification than an iPhone or iPod can provide, or wouldn't stand up to the rigours of regular mobile use.

If you're after headphones that are portable, good looking, and great sounding, the P5 is as good as we've seen. It's a well-rounded product that doesn't skimp on any area, yet still manages to be compact and sturdy while only weighing 200 grams. Our only warning — besides telling you not to audition the P5 if you don't have \$500 burning a hole in your pocket — is that those with large heads should give the P5 a 20-minute trial for size before splurging.



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Bowers & Wilkins	
Convoy	w
Pros	G s
Cons	E n
RRP	\$
Rating	⬆️

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