

My Stax story so far...

I got bitten by the Stax bug a few years back, when I bought a Stax SRS-2020 Basic System II, which I bought solely because my active Naim system did not lend itself to conventional headphones.

I then discovered Head-Fi and subscribed to the Stax threads there, and learnt a great deal from the cogniscenti that posted on them (and you know who you are, because most of you are here, too). Next step was an SRM-1 Mk2 to replace the SRM-212 amp, and then I discovered, via the Head-Fi threads, the world of the older Stax gear: an SR-X Mk3 and SRD-6SB combo followed, then another SR-X, this time with a SRD-7 transformer (which was not the step up I'd expected, and have recently learnt why!).

I was then tempted by the SR-5N (aka Gold) and a (much newer) SRD-6SB, oh, and I forgot to mention the SRS-3030 system that had in-between times become the main one I used - all the others systems got used in the bedroom, office, etc. (or, from a different point of view, as SWMBO says, "How come one person with one set of ears, needs so many headphones?").

Later on, I got a set of SR-404s to upgrade the SR-303s (not exactly a quantum leap forward to my ears) and after a while I decided to try driving them with the old SRM-1 Mk2, and, lo and behold!, the old amp was better!

So, apart from the diminutive SR-001 portable system, that, until recently, was that (crikey, it's shocking how much this all mounts up: until I catalogued my Stax journey here, I hadn't realised how much I'd acquired - perhaps SWMBO is right?).

Finally, I come to the reason for this post: it's got nothing to do with willy-waving (mine's tiny) but more to do with my latest Stax acquisition, an SR-007 and SRM-717. Ever since I first started reading stuff about Stax on the various Head-Fi threads, I'd gleaned that the Omega IIs were the dog's bollocks, and that, of all the Stax amps, the SS SRM-717 was the best at driving them, so my joy knew no bounds when I recently got hold of this seemingly magical combination.

Just to go back a bit: a few weeks ago, just for a change, I'd been using some SR-X Mk3s, driven by an SRD-6SB, powered by a Naim NAC32.5/NAP 140 combination in my main listening room. This was definitely not as hi-fi as the 404s/SRM-1 Mk2, but I found myself listening hour after hour, just grooving away and thoroughly enjoying everything I listened to.

Now, back to the (near-) present: a week ago my long-dreamed of Omega IIs/717 arrived and finally the moment came when I had the 'best-in-the-world' earspeakers on my head, and the stylus dropped into the LP groove...

...as you can probably guess, I was disappointed: I'd read all about the 'darkness', and the fact they really needed driving, and that they took some getting used to, etc., etc., but, even so, I was heart-broken. Had I really had that massive row with SWMBO, and pledged that "...this was it, no more, I now had the best that was available..." and I didn't really like what I was hearing? Oh, no...

I've carried on with them this week, and of course, they are very good: lots of detail, beautifully clean-sounding, etc., etc., but where was the life, the bounce, the I-must-just-play-one-more-side-even-though-it's-2am feeling?

So, what's going on? Were my expectations too high? Had my listening to the SR-X/SRD-6/Naim amp combination ill-prepared me for the Omegas?

(And please, don't just reply that I'm deaf, or that you want to buy them, or that I need to learn about the law of diminishing returns!)

Yours,

Heartbroken of England

\*\*\*\*\*

Nice story

I like my resently arrived SR-007 driven by T1S just fine, but I got to tell you they are not fun headphones, they don't impress you with some tap your toes groovyness.

I find them to be very accurate and polite with good extension, and a bit dark with my T1S. Still SR-007 sounds like an improvement of LNS sound signature that I really liked and seems to be one of the most accurate headphone around, hope you warm-up to them.

\*\*\*\*\*

The O2s are a different animal out of the KGSS and KGBH.

\*\*\*\*\*

Johnny Blue,

I heard the Omega II MkI / SRM-717 combo for the first time last Saturday during the annual Head-Fi meet in Copenhagen, Denmark.

After having the usual "I-love-this-can't-put-these-down" feeling from listening to my balanced L3000s on an RPX-100 amp (the only balanced dynamic amp present at the meet), I decided that I wanted to try the STAX combo, which had been charging up for more than an hour.

Swapping in my own Stello DA220 MkII as source and a top-notch album (Hans Theessink - Slow Train), I sat down and waited in anticipation for what this combo could do.

I was very disappointed.

Of course, I had already been warned by both Mikhail and Todd that the amp would hold the Omega II back, and I was listening to it under regular meet conditions, so there was a fair amount of background noise present. Still, I felt it was a far cry from being the high-end headphone everyone keeps saying it is. It severely lacked dynamics and had little PRAT. In short, it seemed lifeless, perhaps even a bit veiled.

If anyone feels like shipping an amp to me that properly showcases the Omega II for what it really is, please don't hesitate to contact me. I would love to hear the true potential of this headphone, and this goes for the Omega II owner as well (who just can't afford a better amp at the moment).

We would both love to hear this.

\*\*\*\*\*

Thanks (?!!) guys, I know about the after-market amps, but they seem so difficult to get hold of (especially here in the UK, as opposed to the US), and the consensus on Head-Fi was that the SRM-717 was up to the job, but perhaps I just read what I wanted to read.

It is interesting for me to read the above posts, feeling as I do now, and recognising that if I'd read them, say, 2 weeks ago, I'd have dismissed them as the ramblings of some sore losers, or people who were just plain envious. Now, I'm not so sure...

\*\*\*\*\*

Johnny, it is hard to say what went wrong in your case. From my experience I can see a number of possibilities.

1. Don't like the type of sound. O2 is severely lacking in that it does not add prat, slam, romantic lushness etc. It is the best headphone that I own but I was a little surprised that I was not addicted to it and wanted to listen to it all night. I listen mostly to my O2 but even the 404 is in some sense more fun and relaxing.

2. It took me two weeks to find the correct position. I knew about positioning but thought that pressure against the ear was adequate and bending the arcs not necessary. I was wrong and after a slight bending and increased pressure it got more life (but too much pressure is not good either). O2 can loose up to 50 % of sound quality by bad positioning.

3. Insufficient power. I have only tried with 007t and 717 and 007t obviously has insufficient driving capability compared to 717. But I still experience the 717 as slightly insufficient. Not a big problem for me and I am happy with the 717. Imagining a

more powerful amplifier the sound should have more impact and more life. However, I have not heard that yet.

4. Too revealing of the source is also a possibility.

5. Expectations. I don't think there is any "best headphone for all". This is often implicitly implied when talking about the best headphone. It is very difficult or impossible to communicate what is so good with the headphone that you think is best yourself, and others interpret the description differently - or expect magic because it is "the best".

\*\*\*\*\*

The SR-007 like most of the best speakers ever made will not impress except you are craving neutrality above all else. That means that they aren't for everybody and why some prefer the SR-Omega and even... .. the HE90.

Getting the correct fit is very important and since these phones were used it could be impossible due to old earpads that have gone soft. What I'd do first is to drive the 717 as a power amp from the Naim Pre. Open up the 717 and flip the switch located next to the volume pot to disable it.

\*\*\*\*\*

When I first got my SR-007MkII and using it with my KGSS with blackgates I thought it was light as well on the musical side compared with my dynamic setup. But just in the last week I think the KGSS and SR-007MkII has jump ahead my dynamic setup in this area.

My suggestion is to give it time as I have. Either I have changed or it has. I still have my dynamic setup that I listen to and it has not changed but in relationship to it the KGSS/SR-007 has. So I think the SR-007MkII has matured a bit and is becoming much more of what the promise was when I got them.

\*\*\*\*\*

There are a few things that could account for what you're hearing:

1) Source. If you want the 717 to sound romantic, get a romantic source. If you want neutral, use a neutral source. If you want fast, detailed, analytical, and bright, get something that sounds like that. But above all else, if you want good, then get a good source. I'm not sure what you're driving them with, but I'm sure that you can tune them to sound whichever way you want, and sources are the best way to do that.

2) Expectations. This is a neutral headphone, and the 717 is very slightly warm, and slightly lacking in bass control and dynamic range. But basically, it all is very close to neutral. So, if you're used to a euphonic sound signature that exaggerates macrodynamics, then this will not do for you until your ears adjust to the sound.

3) Music. This headphone will lack dynamic range when your music lacks dynamic range. It will sound grainy and compressed when your music is grainy and compressed. But put on something that's good, and it will take your breath away. Even out of the 717, the O2 can blow you away with its impact and macrodynamics when you have a recording that's not brickwalled and dynamically compressed to hell and back. I have a lot of high-quality electronic albums, and the detail, dynamic range, bass, and overall fluid, analog quality to the sound is absolutely mesmerizing.

The O2 is an ultimately neutral transducer that errs somewhat on the side of lushness and has a slightly laidback sound. It's very difficult to drive and becomes dark and congested when there isn't enough power. But when it's driven perfectly, it will still only tell you exactly what your source is doing, and what your music is doing, while adding only a slight degree of lushness.

The O2 Mk2 unfortunately has some colorations and irregularities in its FR which compromise its mission. But, on the other hand, it is \*slightly\* easier to drive.

I say do this: take your O2 and 717 to a high-end audio retailer, and audition whatever sources you can get your hands on. And by this, I mean real high-quality machines. You won't have to

buy something on the spot then and there, but it will give you an idea of the extent to which the O2 responds to source chance.

And if you still don't like it, don't fret, since there are a lot more electrostatics where that came from. If you can afford O2/717 then your choices are nearly limitless. HE60, ESP950, SR-Omega, SR-Lambda/Lambda Signature, 4070, there are a lot of headphones that could have your name on them, and the 717 will do a respectable job with just about all of them.

Lastly, the 717 is adequate for the O2 but it's not ideal. KGSS or Blue Hawaii will take it to the next level - but if you don't like the O2 to begin with, then chances are you're better off with something else.

\*\*\*\*\*

Thanks for the extensive answers you've given: I'm impressed that so many people here have put themselves out to help explain, and deal with, my situation, especially since I'm a total 'newbie' on this site (look, it says so!).

OK, let me deal first of all with source, as this is, of course, absolutely crucial: my main source is a Linn LP12 Sondek, recently fitted with a Keel, a Lingo power supply, an Ekos Mk2 arm, and an Arkiva cartridge. After that, it's all Naim: a Prefix head-amp powered by its own Hi-Cap, running into a Naim 82 pre-amp, which is powered by 2 Hi-Caps. (What happens then in terms of power amps and speakers is not relevant to this discussion so I'll summarise it by saying it's a Naim 6-pack driving Isobariks.) My secondary source (pretty much unused for serious listening, but just for background music or for something to which I can doze off) is a Naim CDS, which has its own power supply.

I really don't think the source is an issue here: I believe it's pretty much as good as it gets for my preferred sound in the home (and we don't want to start a debate here about what this means, there are other hi-fi fora which lend themselves to these circular arguments!).

What the above does show is that, above all, I want a lively, music-lead performance, with loads of dynamic and above all, lots of PRaT! And this, maybe, is where I have come unstuck with the 007/717. I've had an awful, sleepless night, and the word that kept coming into my mind was Birgir's remark yesterday, and repeated by Catscratch, about the Stax 007 being 'neutral'. As some of you may know (and, again, I don't want to get into a discussion about this here), the Linn/Naim system, which has taken me about 20 years to collect together, bit by bit (and which has now been largely superseded by completely new Naim amplification and newer speaker designs) is anything but neutral: that is not what my hi-fi is about!

(Incidentally, Birgir's other suggestion, about using the Naim 32.5 to drive the output stages of the 717 is not really feasible, since the pre-amp doesn't work on its own: it needs another Hi-Cap or a power amp to power it.)

I certainly think fit is important, and I will go through the process that Birgir has suggested elsewhere, and yet I'm still left with the feeling that somehow it's only tinkering at the edges, and that what I've bought just doesn't fit in with my preferred listening style...

\*\*\*\*\*

Naim gear is far from neutral so that's your problem right there. Getting a special output cable from the preamp could be the way to go though or just borrow a second Naim preamp and test it... C'mon... take one for the team

The Lambda Signature is much better than the current models to my ears and I could only use the new ones for one thing... harvest the drivers to plant them in something else.

\*\*\*\*\*

I have a Chord Chrysalis DIN to RCA interconnect, where the DIN plug is specially wired to take the tape output from the NAC 82 (the Chrysalis is believed, around these parts, to be the most synergistic with Naim, but of course, it's not actually Naim it's going to, it's Stax!).

I have some other cables I've tried: the Chord Cobra is more extended, but seems to have less PRaT, a Preh DIN/Van Damme cable/Neutrik RCA combination does a good job, but is not vastly different to the Chrysalis.

I've even tried a special Chord Chrysalis 4-pin DIN to RCA interconnect, running straight from the Hi-Cap (which powers the Naim Prefix head-amp and which supplies the signal to the pre-amp) to the 717, thus cutting the pre-amp entirely out of the circuit, and this had a similar effect to the Cobra: more hi-fi, less music.

I'll have to take a look at getting a Naim pre-amp output straight into the 717 (after having altered the internal switch!), and I can also investigate using balanced interconnects instead of the RCAs, and I still fear that your first remark may be salient here: "Naim gear is far from neutral so that's your problem right there."

This would also explain why I've had such a good time with the SRD boxes (and you may have noted from my Head-Fi posts about this preference): it's when I'm using these with Linn or Naim amplification that I get what I'm looking for with Stax headphones.

\*\*\*\*\*

I reach for the SR-5 pro when I want that. Granted, I don't have a BH.

Oh yes, the 717 loves balanced drive.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Naim preamp will impact some of that coloration on the Stax so you could like the sound. The original CDS is a good player but highly colored so the SR-007 is only playing what you feed it.

All Naim gear is SE only (like most Euro gear) so that is a moot point.

\*\*\*\*\*

SE = Single ended. You can put on XLR plugs but that doesn't make them balanced. European manufacturers only use XLR on items that will be sold in the US and often it is just the plugs that are balanced but they are fed only the + output.

\*\*\*\*\*

I have a dCS / KGSS / SR-007 setup and recently got an SR-X Mk2 which I use together with SRM-313 in the office (soundcard as source). While SR-007 is dramatically more capable technically, I must say that in terms of enjoyment and the certain type of sound afforded by electrostatics, SR-X is virtually on par (at least for rock / synthpop). Going the other way, your disappointment doesn't surprise me one bit.

With better amplification, you should get more 'liveliness' out of SR-007, free from the technical limitations of SR-X.

\*\*\*\*\*

Interesting... so it's beginning to seem like the Omegas are just not delivering what I'm looking for, unless perhaps I risk more dinars on a KGSS or BH, which is not going to happen any day soon...

\*\*\*\*\*

Being a neutral transducer they will sound exactly like the system that they are used in. Give them more power and they will have a larger soundstage, more bass and treble but the fundamental character of the headphones will not change. If you are using Chord cables then I'd start by switching to something better and often cheaper. Since Naim has such a strong presence in the UK you shouldn't have any problem finding a DIN-RCA cable from somebody else, preferably a silver cable. I tried a few of the Chord cables in my system and they aren't a good match to the super resolving Omega.

\*\*\*\*\*

Yes, the overrated, overly refined, and forever-apologized for Stax Omega II. They are gorgeous, insanely comfortable, and wonderfully made.

I don't get into it with these Stax O2 guys any more. They like what they hear, and it seems to suit them. I know what I'm hearing. I do have highly developed listening skills, being that my work is the final voicing, tuning and evaluating of pipe organs costing in the millions of dollars. With an organ, or any other acoustic instrument, perfection is not possible, and neither is it desirable. If we could take one of our instruments to a level of unquestioned evenness and flatness of response, it would put one to sleep in minutes. To overly refine them is to suck the life out. Musical instruments are flawed, voices are flawed, and most of this character occurs at upper harmonic pitch levels, exactly what the OmegaII lops off. There is no life in the music, and much of the presence of the instruments is masked. When I heard a recording of one of my instruments through the O2, I switched back to my trusty HD600 after 30 seconds.

You hear what I hear, and we are definitely not alone. It's just that not many people can fork over enough cash for an O2, so they are but a dream for most people. I coveted them for some time before I bought some for myself for my 50th birthday. I was underwhelmed from the very start, and I blamed everything else but the phones for several weeks. This is until I realized that they are a technical wonder, but they kinda suck for musical presentation. Spritzer and the rest keep saying that it's the amp - not enough power. Well, they should at least sound PRETTY GOOD with a Stax amp, wouldn't you think? I got a Lambda about 2 weeks after the O2, and the O2 went back in the box for good that day.

What I did was dump them before I did much to hurt my chances of selling them with negative posts. I got every dime back from them, and was thrilled to have done so.

I have some Yamaha YH-1 orthos, modded with organ keyboard felt, reflex dots and a Denon D5000 cable. This is powered by an old 1958 Magnavox tube amp from an old phonograph. With some minor flaws, this combo blows the \*\*\*\* out of the O2, and my total investment was about \$200. The SRX and Lambdas sound great from this as well.

Oh well, live, spend and learn. You should be able to dump the O2s, but best to be quiet about them until they're gone!

Ah yes, the gospel according to Spritzer ... his truth, not mine, works for him. So tired of headband this, amp that, source issues, earpads, cables ... b.s. They are dark sounding headphones with a closed in sound. Really not bad cans, except for the horrible price! In all, a decent enough headphone, but the worst audio value ever, as far as I am concerned.

I got very little sense of dynamics and ambience from them, and they certainly don't convey the natural exertion of a singer or acoustic instrument reaching for high notes. Just a nice, polite presentation.

For me, audio is about enjoyment, and sense of the live performance - "being there-ness", rather than just accuracy.

\*\*\*\*\*