

MARK LEVINSON

NO. 5909

As the price tag demands, the No.5909 bring wired-standard sound to wireless convenience

We wonder how many headphone and hi-fi manufacturers saw a green light beam in front of their eyes when, at the end of 2020, Apple announced a pair of wireless headphones - the AirPods Max - costing twice as much as the then-current premium competition.

Whatever the answer, there has been a glut of more expensive wireless headphones of late. Among them are the Bowers & Wilkins Px8 and the Focal Bathys featured on the previous pages, and these Mark Levinson No. 5909.

The Mark Levinsons enter our test room as the most expensive wireless pair we have tested and therefore do so with a weight of expectation on their shoulders. Can wireless performance ever be so good as to justify such an expense (roughly three times more than the Sony WH-1000XM5)?

While there is more to most products we test than their specification, you would expect a pair at this price to tick the right boxes - and the right boxes the No. 5909 do indeed tick. Wireless connectivity comes in aptX Adaptive and LDAC flavours, which are essentially the best-quality Bluetooth codecs currently in use. Qualcomm has come up with a

"THE CRYSTAL CLEAR AND CRISPLY DETAILED MANNER IN WHICH THEY PRESENT THE TRACK'S THEATRICAL INSTRUMENTATION IS BEST DESCRIBED AS SPARKLING"

The No. 5909 support the best quality Bluetooth codecs available

next-generation aptX Lossless solution that can supposedly wirelessly transmit lossless audio uncompressed, but it is not likely to reach a decent number of devices for a while yet. So, high-quality Bluetooth support: tick.

Well-implemented ANC

Active noise cancellation is another box ticked and it comes in three modes: ANC High, Adaptive and ANC Low. An Awareness mode designed to let noise in for temporary convenience is available in (effective) Voice Pass and (more effective) Ambient options too. You can set your preferred ANC and Awareness settings in the accompanying Mark Levinson app.

That is arguably the biggest justification for using the app, which otherwise simply lets you activate on-head detection so that music is automatically paused when the headphones are taken off/put back on (which works well); set an auto-timer to turn the headphones off after a period of no music playing; and choose between Neutral (default and, we find, preferred), Enhanced and Attenuated EQ sound profiles. For many, following some initial experimentation, the app will be surplus to everyday listening needs.

Noise cancellation is well implemented, albeit more functional than forceful in its intensity. That's not a criticism exactly; the Mark Levinsons

physically block sound better than most headphones anyway thanks to their build and solid-yet-satisfactory clamp force. And we admire the consistency of their sonic character and quality when ANC is on and off - not by any means a given for noise-cancelling wireless headphones. We don't feel compelled to activate ANC on relatively noisy public transport, but are pleased it's there when a quieter classical piece comes on.

Activating ANC doesn't detrimentally impact battery life as much as it could either, though naturally there is a difference between the claimed ANC on (30 hours) and ANC off (34 hours) figures, which we are pleased to say translate in real life too.

Handily for the forgetful, a 15-minute 'fast' charge offers six hours of listening, too. In this day and age, you won't be surprised to read that the No. 5909 charge via USB-C. You will also be more relieved than surprised to know that a 1.2m USB-C charging cable and both 1.25m and 4m USB-C to 3.5mm cables for wired listening come supplied, packaged in an oval hardshell case alongside a USB-C to USB-A adaptor and aeroplane adaptor.

These headphones are hefty and padded enough to enjoy in comfort for hours at home, yet also glitzy and compact enough (since the cups can fold flat) to take out and about. Nevertheless, their red anodised aluminium frame, metallic painted ear cups (available in red or black) and leather headband and earpads don't immediately strike us as impressive for the money. In fact, initially, we find ourselves questioning their perceived-versus-real value, especially as we slide our fingers over the small, plasticky earcup buttons. But, despite their finish, after handling and wearing the No. 5909 for several weeks, it becomes easier to appreciate the sturdy quality of their construction.

In that time, however, we don't become any more attached to the on-cup

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★



The No. 5909's 40mm Beryllium drivers impress sonically

controls. We find ourselves wishing that Mark Levinson had opted for a classier, more intuitive three-key volume and playback button, as it isn't easy to discern quickly between the middle (play/pause and skip track) and side (volume up and volume down) controls when the headphones are being worn.

Sparkling presentation

That an unremarkable button is the first and last of our criticisms gives you a strong hint at the answer to the question we posed at the beginning of our review: can wireless performance ever be so good as to justify such an expense? Again, the No. 5909 need to perform substantially better than the class-leading crop of cheaper competition - and they do. While their performance is still short of the best available from similarly priced wired headphones, it's easily the best we have come across from wireless equivalents.



The vivacious production of Toto's *Rosanna* gives the Mark Levinsons a sonic canvas on which to showboat - those biting drums, rich vocals, and infectiously musical arrangements. They lap the track up as enthusiastically as a dog eating spilled ice cream. No part of the frequency spectrum is given undue priority, and that, coupled with the headphones' attention to detail and brisk nature, makes them utterly compelling to listen to in a way lesser wireless headphones are not.

They aren't concerned only with having a good time either, being impressively shrewd when delivering the subtle dynamics of Ludovico Einaudi's piano playing, and when asked to convey the woodwind textures and hit the climactic heights of the soundtrack to *The Hobbit: The Unexpected Journey*.

As alluded to previously, the Mark Levinson No. 5909 aren't necessarily replacements for a wired set-up you are happy with. A laptop feeding a Chord Mojo 2 DAC connected to Grado SR325x wired headphones offers greater all-round sonic sophistication and finesse. But for anyone after the convenience of wireless without sacrificing too much sound quality to get it, and lucky enough to afford such a best-of-both-worlds solution, these Mark Levinsons are highly recommendable.

Perceived value may not get top marks, but sonic value certainly does - and that's really what matters here. Mark our words, these wireless headphones really wow.

The first adjective that comes to mind when we don the Mark Levinsons, connect them to our Astell & Kern music player via aptX HD Bluetooth and play Black Country, New Road's *Chaos Space Machine* is 'sparkling'. That is because of the crystal-clear and crisply detailed manner in which they present the track's theatrical instrumentation. The soundfield produced by the 40mm Beryllium-coated drivers has the spic-and-span cleanliness and astute organisation not to be overwhelmed by the sonic density and frenetic energy of such an experimental piece - even at higher listening levels. And every corner of it embraces the subtle details and dynamics of this wild composition.

WHAT HI-FI?

SOUND

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

BUILD

★★★★★

FOR

- Benchmark wireless performance
- ANC
- Durable construction

AGAINST

- Inaccessible price for most
- Basic on-cup controls

VERDICT

Mark Levinson manages to justify the huge price tag with benchmark wireless performance

RATING ★★★★★