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AKG K 601

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What you need to know

We like: Comfortable grey velour cushions; impressive sound quality

We don't like: Pricey; very large; not intended to work with portable players such as the iPod

CNET.co.uk judgement: AKG's K 601s are fast becoming an audiophile favourite -- maybe because the sound quality is more speakerlike than that of any other headphones we've tested

Full Review

Reviewed September 19, 2006

Reviewed by Steve Guttenberg

Audiophiles are scooping up AKG's high-end headphones, the K 701s (£217), as fast as the company can make them. Quantities are so scarce that we had to 'settle' for samples of the step-down version -- the AKG K 601s, priced from £150 -- to review. We couldn't wait to audition them to see if they would live up to the hype.

Design

The K 601s' large, doughnut-shape grey velour cushions completely cover your ears. The genuine leather and metal headband is very well made, and yet the headphones are fairly light, at just 227g. They're extremely comfortable -- even after extended listening sessions the K 601s were a pleasure to wear. The flexible single-sided oxygen-free copper cable is 3m long and terminates with a standard 6mm (1/4 inch), gold-plated plug that's permanently attached to the left ear-cup.

The K 601s have an open-back, dynamic design, featuring Varimotion ultra-precision two-layer diaphragms -- each pair of K 601s are said to be individually tested to meet AKG's exacting 'made in Austria' quality standards. These headphones are intended as stay-at-home models -- they're too big and bulky for on-the-go use. The headphones are also power hungry, so puny **iPods** and MP3 players won't supply enough juice to produce much volume. High-end headphones are typically best suited to be plugged into an AV receiver.

Features

The most remarkable thing about the AKG K 601s' sound is its 'out-of-head' imaging. If you hate the canned sound of most

headphones, you'll love the K 601s. Not only is the sound bigger, but the stereo left-to-right positioning of voices and instruments is more precisely focused between your ears. The K 601s' imaging also extends forward and to the rear, making it the most speaker-like headphone set we've ever heard.

The headphones strutted their stuff on the thrilling *Flightplan* DVD. Most of the movie takes place in the jetliner's cabin, where the ambient drone of jet engines, the whoosh of air conditioning, and even the tinny sound of the passengers' headphones were all captured in remarkable detail. The deep bass rumblings of the aliens tearing up the streets on *The War of the Worlds* DVD sounded ominously subterranean.

The AKG K 601s' open quality was also well suited to music, so when we played concert recordings from Van Morrison and Wilco, the audience appeared from way out to the sides. The sound on soul diva Bettye LaVette's *I've Got My Own Hell To Raise* CD cut right to the bone, her heart-wrenching vocals providing authentic rawness that hearkens back to 1960s R&B recordings. The K 601s gave LaVette plenty of room to belt out her tunes, and they'll give you plenty of space to hear it all.

Performance

The **Beyerdynamic DT 880** (£162) headphones were tonally on a par with the K 601s, just not as open sounding. With style and comfort being equal, the AKG K 601s' spacious sound is great for a lot of sources, but the DT 880s may be a better choice if you prefer a more 'close-up' audio experience.

Edited by David Rudden

Additional editing by Elizabeth Griffin

