

# Precide Ergo 2 headphones Keith Howard

I am one of that late-1960s, early-1970s generation of schoolboy for whom a blossoming interest in high-quality audio and chronic impecuniosity found a resolution in headphones. When, clutching the reward for satisfactory O-level result, and sundry summer earnings returned to the sixth form via the discount warehouses of Tottenham Court Road, there were sufficient resources for a BSR MP60 turntable, Goldring G850 cartridge and Trio amplifier (KA as it?) but not enough for a pair of loudspeakers. So with what 'little remained I bought a pair of Trio 'cans'; Gordon J King had said complimentary things about them in *HI-FI Sound*.

To a teenager at boarding school headphones had advantages other than modest price: you could listen to the new Emerson, Lake and Palmer album when you should be doing Biology prep. But when another bout of summer employment at university saw me finally graduate to loudspeakers, it came as a blessed relief. Today the only time I use headphones by choice is when transcribing taped interviews.



Yet it was a headphone which afforded me one of the few audio experiences I would describe as revelatory: a Jecklin Float Electrostat to be exact top model in the now out-going range of these distinctive Swiss-made headphones. The Ergo 2, subject of this review is the second in the three-model range which replaces it (and which now carries the Precide name). I only listened to the Float Electrostat for a few tens of seconds, but the experience lives with me still. It was the first time I had experienced headphones that lived up to the extravagant claims commonly made for this most private form of musical enjoyment, short of silently reading a score.

On the face of it, headphone listening ought to be revelatory most of the time it eliminates room acoustics from the replay equation. Together with many of the nastier habits of loudspeakers: directivity, diffraction and cabinet resonance prime among them. Little wonder it has become an audio cliché to contend that headphone listening offers resolution that few if any loudspeakers can match. Some loudspeakers have even been described as large headphones a back-handed compliment I could never quite grasp, because I don't quite beat things this way.

For me, the vast majority of headphones represent a poor second best to loudspeaker listening. They have odd tonal balances, waffly bass, striking colorations. And if they do sometimes provide insights that a good pair of loudspeakers do not, they are often as not unwelcome ones. Just as viewing an old master painting with X-rays reveals details of the artist's additions and deletions but tells you nothing of the quality of the final work, so kicked music stands and inharmonious humming add nothing, for me, to the core musical experience. If the basic sound isn't right, then resolution of this sort has little meaning.



Hearing the Jecklin Float Electrostat opened my ears to the possibility that headphone listening need not be this way, and it was the enduring recollection of that experience which encouraged me to seek out the new Precide range. The Electrostat's replacement which intriguingly uses Air Motion Transformer drive elements - was not immediately available (I hope to report on it .soon) so in the interim I settled for the Ergo 2 instead, the more costly of the two conventional dynamic models in the range.

I say conventional, but that was never an apt description of Jecklins, whether talking of their appearance or their *modus operandi*. Most headphones naturally fall into one of three classifications: circum-aural, supra-aural and intra-aural, according to whether they surround the pinna, press upon it or lodge inside. The Jecklins/Precides form a fourth category all their own. A narrow, vertical strip of soft foam material at the rear of each capsule lifts the headphones off the ears, yet doesn't encircle them. The result is a uniquely unencumbered, airy sensation which makes most alternatives feel oppressively uncomfortable by comparison. Sonic advantages are claimed too in that sound imaging on the ears is able to interact naturally with the pinna corrugations that are as unique to each individual as fingerprints. Supra-aural headphones (which distort the pinna) and intra-aural headphones (which bypass it) cannot.

The Ergo's Float progenitors were so habitually described as "space age" because of their half-helmet appearance that many observers were blinded to the rationality of their design. Spreading the weight of the headphones across a wide, foam covered headband reduces scalp pressure and therefore discomfort, while eliminating the sprung metal structure common to many other premium headphone designs removes an often significant source of unwelcome structural resonance. (Try flicking a finger against such headbands while listening to music to hear the coloration they introduce.)

It is true, though, that the Floats - because they lacked adjustment did not suit every head equally. That is one of the principal design changes with the new Ergo models. The capsules can now be moved up and down the headband on detents to suit a wider range of craniums.

The second major change, setting aside revised aesthetics, is the use of rare earth neodymium magnets in the drive elements, which permit a much greater field strength to be achieved without unacceptable weight increase the Ergo 2s, though they look massive, tip the scales at a modest 410g without lead, 495g with (380g specified). Increased sensitivity is the principal benefit, which renders the two dynamic Ergos (nominal impedance 100 ohms) better suited to a wider range of headphone outlets. Even with their revised styling, the new Precides-it has to be admitted -still make less than elegant headwear. But as was once remarked about car design, that only matters when you're on the outside looking in. I found the Ergo 2s, for all their bulk, uncommonly comfortable to wear long-term, and that's what counts.

## Performance

Headphone outlets being an increasingly rare fitment on today's CD players and amplifiers. I found myself with no readymade way of energizing the Ergo 2s for this review. So I took the trouble to construct a high-power voltage divider which allowed me to drive them directly from the output of a power amplifier, without sacrifice to electromagnetic damping. With a source impedance of just 1 **66** ohms, damping factor was held at a high 60 to prevent any deterioration of bass performance or compromise of amplifier control over diaphragm resonances.

Not that bass is a traditional headphone strength. More typically low frequency performance is either thickened and plummy or else notable by its absence. The Ergos score here. Although their bass is slightly recessed, oscillator tests show that there is appreciable -albeit somewhat distorted-output right down to 20Hz. Nothing can ever replace the visceral 'whole body' experience of loudspeaker bass, but compared with the headphone norm the Ergo 2s do a creditable job. None of the alternatives I had to hand a motley crew ranging from large supra-aurals to small intra-aurals could match them, falling into either the leaden or 'absent without leave' categories identified above.

Indeed, the Ergo's superiority held for the entire audible spectrum. Though they have a slightly mid-forward tonal balance, curtailed high treble output and lack the ultimate 'hear through' qualities of an electrostatic design, they comfortably trounced all opposition I was able to muster, such as it was. That is, provided suitable care was taken over adjusting the capsule position on the headband. My natural inclination, I found, was to set the capsules too high, which results in a distinctly fuzzier, less fully developed sound quality than if they are pulled down a couple of notches. Potential purchasers take note.

Two conclusions are called for, depending on whether the Ergos are being considered as an alternative to loudspeakers or as an adjunct. Given the bald choice of either headphones or loudspeakers at this price level, I would choose the latter every time. Even a budget loudspeaker, provided it is one of the better examples of the breed, offers a scale and overall naturalness of sound that headphones generally cannot match. But if, for whatever reason, headphones are forced on you for some part of your listening, then the Ergos demand shortlisting. Their idiosyncratic design is not individuality for individuality's sake, but a genuine and largely successful attempt to re-define the headphone experience (a

**Specification****Frequency response** 20Hz-20kHz**Nominal impedance** 100 ohms (per capsule)**Sensitivity** 96dB at 1 kW (DIN 45580) - -**Power handling** 0.4W**Total harmonic distortion** <0.3%**Weight** 380g**Cable length** 3 metres**Connector** standard/. in jack**Manufacturer** Precide sa, CH-6834 Morbid Inf., Via Vela, Switzerland