

Ultrasonone Edition 5 'Limited' headphone

by Nicholas Ripley



There's a phrase in British English that might not be universal – 'shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted'. In this case, it means reviewing a pair of strictly limited edition headphones that have all but sold out. There are just a handful of pairs of the Ultrasonone Edition 5 still available, they are extremely expensive by headphone standards, and if you have to sell your kids into slavery or hand over a kidney to buy them while you can, it might just be worth considering.

Ultrasonone is a German headphone brand, which is exceptionally popular among professionals, and growing in popularity with domestic headphone users. Most of the range is built in Taiwan, but the top-deck models are built in the company HQ in Tutzing, to the south-west of Munich. The company has two principal selling points unique to its headphones – the S-Logic drive unit placement designed to make a sound more like traditional stereo, and LE (low emission) or ULE (ultra low emission) drive units, which are claimed to limit listener fatigue, by limiting electromagnetic radiation so near the listener's ears.

S-Logic (also known as 'Natural Surround Sound') is perhaps the key seller for the Ultrasonone brand, and as an increasing number of traditional audiophiles begin to dabble with the world between their ears, so this form of driver layout will undoubtedly prove more widely popular. It works by offsetting the acoustic centres of the drive units in the ear-cup itself. Most conventional dynamic headphones have the drive unit centred to the position of the ear canal of the listener, and as a result the sound is more or less 'beamed' direct into the ear itself. This exacerbates an effect known as 'lateralisation' where the sounds generated by a pair of headphones seem to appear inside the head of the listener. Most headphone makers have recognised and compensated for this effect, but not entirely, and it can be a discomforting feeling, especially noticeable for longstanding audiophiles more used to the sound from loudspeakers in a room. By repositioning these drivers inside the ear-cup, using a funnel-shaped arrangement, it creates



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► more of a sense of ‘exterior’ soundstaging, akin to the sort of imaging one finds in loudspeakers. Open-backed headphones do not seem to create lateralised imagery with the same fervour and are often popular choices among loudspeaker-based audiophiles. In the Edition 5, S-Logic is taken to the next step, with a revised funnel-shape and a titanium-coated 40mm driver. This is dubbed S-Logic EX.

A bonus to this Natural Surround System is listeners tend to play music around 3-4dB quieter than through conventional headphone systems, which should promote better ear health over the years.

Meanwhile the neodymium magnets powering those titanium-coated drivers are heavily μ -metal shielded, in line with Ultrason's ULE (ultra low emission) technology. Ultrason isn't that comfortable with the idea of rare earth magnets delivering hundreds or thousands of Gauss of magnetic field strength a couple of centimetres from an owner's noggin (especially for professionals, who spend hours every day with their brain inside a magnetic field), so the company shields the magnets inside its headphones. The jury is out as to whether there are any health benefits to this (it appears to be a corollary to the ‘mobile phones cause brain cancer’ scare of a few years ago), but all that μ -metal shielding does make the headphones both feel weighty without feeling heavy on the head, and it does seem to help reduce environmental noise.

Beyond this, all else is luxury: sheer, unadulterated, headphonic luxury. The Edition 5 naturally comes in its own presentation case, complete with fabulous case candy, including a custom-made headphone stand, and two sets

of black/silver braided cables (one 1.5m long with a 3.5mm jack, the other 4m long with a 6.3mm jack, both connecting to the headphones with high-quality Neutrik plugs). While the black anodised aluminium headband is classy, it's as nothing compared to the headband, ear cups, and pads. The headband and earpads are crafted from leather from long-haired Ethiopian sheep – this was chosen for its extreme softness and comfort. And it really is soft and comfy, making even buttery soft calves leather feel coarse and rough. Whether the leather of Kenyan or Eritrean sheep would have the same softness is not up for debate.

The cups themselves are made from ‘moor oak’. This is oak from hundreds (or even thousands) of years ago that fell into peat bogs and, deprived of the oxygen required to rot, instead part-fossilised. Moor oak, also known as ‘bog-oak’, ‘Quercus’, or ‘morta’ is extremely rare, extraordinarily expensive, not dissimilar to tropical hardwood in density and aesthetics, and is highly-prized by pipe smokers, due to it being practically fireproof and resin-free. It's also extremely dense and neutral sounding for audio use, especially when laser etched with an aluminium logo and treated with seven layers of varnish.

The Edition 5 gained the suffix ‘Limited’ because the company made just 555 pairs. It's a celebration of ten years of the Edition series, which began in 2003 with the Edition 7. These hand-crafted headphones took a considerable amount of time to produce, and typically change hands in minutes on the second-hand market, but there are a rare few still left unsold.

Of all the audio products I've heard, or even heard of, I don't think any can match the break-in time required of the Edition 5. It's been documented by one careful listener, and confirmed by Ultrason, its users, and even Synthax (its UK distributor). Essentially, the sound of the ‘sone will change and change for the first 700 hours before finally settling down. That's a solid month of music playing through the headphones before they finally end the break-in process and sound as good as they could. And yet, it doesn't matter a damn to those who use them, because the process is a (mostly) enjoyable ride, and the end result is well worth the effort.

This is, quite simply, the best headphone I have ever heard. And, if you are predominately a loudspeaker listener, ►

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: closed-back dynamic headphone
S-LogicEX 'Natural Surround Sound'
technology ULE technology

Impedance: 32 Ohm

Driver: 40mm, titanium plated

Magnet: NdFeB

Frequency range: 5–46,000 Hz

SPL: 96 dB

Weight (excl. cord): 280 g

Features: Two detachable cords: Black-silver braided high flex cable – Short cord: Length 1.5m, with angled 3.5mm NEUTRIK plug, gold plated – Long cord: Length 4m, with 6.3mm NEUTRIK plug, gold plated

Full metal headband

Marsh/bog oak ear cups

Dark chrome PVD plated ear cup rings

Ethiopian sheep leather earpads and head pad

Price: £2,995

Manufactured by: Ultrasone

URL: www.ultrasone-headphones.com

Distributed by: Synthax Audio (UK) Ltd

URL: www.synthax.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1727 821870



what the Edition 5 does for you are simple: I rediscovered Tchaikovsky and John Coltrane, and discovered that I like King Tubby and Portishead through these headphones.

In fact, I keep writing 'loudspeakers' instead of 'headphones', because the Edition 5 don't sound like headphones to me. I'm of the age and audio-experience who typically consider headphones as a necessary evil of night-time and mobile listening, but the Edition 5 is a different beast. It makes me relish times when late-night listening demands headphones, and suddenly 7:30pm becomes 'late night' listening. The Edition 5 just feels naturally right, with instruments out there in space in front of you, and going back to 'regular' headphones is to go back to a nether-world of musical spectres floating in and around your frontal lobes by comparison.

I am duty bound to find flaw in anything, but short of having to put them back in a box so some lucky sod can enjoy them for years to come, I am struggling. I guess if your experience of good audio is firmly in the headphone camp, then the significance of that 'natural surround' may be lessened, and you may prefer a more 'conventional' in-head experience. But that's not for me.

There is some good news at the end of this tale, too. There's an Edition 5 Unlimited that, as its name suggests, is not restricted to just 555 pairs. It doesn't have quite the handcrafted appeal, and does without the moor oak ear cups and the Ethiopian sheep leather ear pads. It's also not quite as infinitely close matched as the Edition 5. I've heard these Unlimited versions briefly and compared them to the 'Limited' model, and they get very, very close indeed. Meanwhile, if you are lucky enough to find one of the 555 pairs of Edition 5, do virtually anything this side of breaking a few Commandments to own them. +

▶ this is probably the best headphone you will ever hear, too. You will need a good headphone amplifier to realise this to its fullest extent, but suitably driven, this is a headphone to savour. It manages to produce sound of great beauty, of melodic integrity and harmonic richness and structure, but also a sound of unparalleled dynamic shading and shimmer. Add to that detail of such crystalline subtlety as to make musicians come alive in front of you, a tonal balance so intrinsically right it's almost impossible to fault, and articulation of instruments and voices so refined and yet so extended that you simply bask in the music being played.

Hundreds of hours of listening is pointless for a review, but a pleasure with the Edition 5. They went from being 'excellent' to 'outstanding' to 'oh wow!' in a linear manner that meant you just turned up the smile each time you listened to them. The best musical examples I can find to illustrate