

Audio-Technica ATH-ANC7 QuietPoint Noise-Canceling Headphones

by Rob Sabin



Recently, it seems like every manufacturer wants a piece of the market for high-end noise-canceling headphones, a business invented and more or less dominated by Bose. Last year, I reviewed that company's QuietComfort 3 headphones and was nearly breathtaken by their \$349 price, but they proved so likeable I was hard-pressed to hammer them for being expensive. As I wrote in my review for Sound & Vision's Web site, the QC 3s, which boast a lightweight on-ear design, were extremely comfortable for lengthy listening sessions (for me, at least). And their sound was cannily balanced, providing just enough of a bump in the upper bass to give a sense of fullness (but not boominess) with most recordings and just enough of a rolloff in the highs to avoid sizzle that can become fatiguing. By year's end, I had probably logged several hundred hours with my QC 3s, and we honored Bose with one of our 2006 Editors' Choice Awards.

Recently, Audio-Technica and Sennheiser, two companies that know a thing or two about both headphones and good sound, introduced models that take square aim at the same customer. The subject of this review, the Audio-Technica ATH-ANC7 QuietPoint noise-canceling headphones, sell for \$220 - about 35% less than the QC 3s - and, as you'll read, also

proved highly recommendable. But whereas the Bose phones create a seductive sound that many listeners will find appealing, the A-Ts have a refreshing accuracy that speaks to a completely different experience. You might call these two headsets the yin and yang of noise-canceling phones.

FEATURES

The ANC7 headphones feature a nice black-and-silver, sculpted earcup design made of an obviously high-impact molded plastic. A small slider switch with a blue LED on the left cup activates the noise-canceling circuit. A couple of small mesh screens on each cup protect the embedded microphones used to process the ambient noise. The phones have a nice solidity to them; the pivots for the earcups are thick and strong, and they gave the impression of being able to withstand a fall (although I didn't test this). The earpads are covered in faux leather and also appear to be made of top-grade materials.

Like the Bose phones, the ANC7s come in their own hard case with a velvet-covered, molded insert to protect them for storage and travel. Make no mistake: These are not compact phones, and they require a serious commitment of briefcase or backpack space to carry around. The ANC7s' case is well finished in black woven canvas, and there's a

zippered web pocket that Velcros to the inside cover to hold the 1.6-meter (5.2-foot) headphone cord and the two plug adapters that come with the phones: a mini-to-dual-mini for airline use and a mini-to-quarter-inch for a receiver or preamp. As with the QC 3s, the cord is fully detachable so the phones can be used for noise canceling alone without a dangling wire. This cord has standard stereo mini-plugs on either side, but Audio-Technica has thoughtfully made one a right-angle plug; either works at the headphone end so you can reverse the cable as needed to accommodate your source.

Unlike the QC 3s, the ANC7s do not include a battery charger. No harm done - you don't need one: The phones run on a single AAA battery that loads into a clever pop-up drawer on top of the right earcup. This design means there's no lid to fumble with or drop under the seat of the commuter in front of you on your morning bus ride. Battery life is claimed to be up to 40 hours, and a replacement, should you need one, is as close as the next convenience store.

Also unlike the Bose models -including both the QC 3 and its predecessor, the QC 2 - the headphones still work when the noise-canceling circuitry is turned off. You won't get any noise cancellation, and you'll find the sound a couple of dB lower in volume, but you will get sound. That can make a huge difference midway through a transatlantic flight when your battery unexpectedly gives out.

Another critical difference is that these are around-ear headphones vs. the QC 3s' previously noted on-ear design. Frankly, I was a bit skeptical about their long-term comfort when I first put them on, but they proved to be light enough in their pressure fit and soft enough in their padding not to be bothersome over some pretty good hauls. Ultimately, though, they are both larger and heavier than the QC 3s and don't quite share the featherweight, forget-they're-there quotient that the QC 3s enjoy. (I can't say how they compare directly with the QC 2s, which also have an over-ear design.)

PERFORMANCE

The most immediate and obvious sonic trait I heard when I first put on the ANC7s was their outstanding midrange and, especially, high-frequency detail. No matter what I listened to - rock, pop, jazz, country, classical - it was like a veil had been lifted from the music compared with the sound on my reference QC 3s. On the delightfully delicate rendition of "The Girl from Ipanema" by Rosa Passos and Ron Carter on Chesky's compilation of The World's Greatest Audiophile Vocal Recordings, the fine brushwork on the cymbals was reproduced with their metallic shimmer intact, something that was crushed and compressed on the QC 3s. The A-Ts also reproduced this track, and others on this well-recorded CD, with a bit more air and spaciousness than the Bose phones did.

When I switched over to Giles and George Martin's amazing audiophile mashup of classic Beatles hits on Love, I was blown away by the detail in the guitar and percussion taps that start off the "Blackbird"/"Yesterday" medley and by the degree of intonation and detail revealed in Paul McCartney's vocals. The massed strings in the CD remix of the Mercury Living Presence recording of Howard Hanson's Symphony No. 2 played back with a kind of rich body that at least began to evoke the real thing - and again, with a spaciousness that gave the individual sections and instruments an extra measure of three-dimensional realism. The solo oboe had that gorgeous reedy quality that gives the instrument its signature sound but is so often lost in electronic reproduction. As an added bonus, these large headphones proved surprisingly efficient: I was able to drive them to pretty high volume, and get pretty good dynamic peaks, from a low-power flash-memory music player.

Aside from matters of comfort, about the only time I longed to return to my QC 3s was when the big timpani came in on the Hanson symphony - or, say, when I paid close attention to the lone string bass that accompanies Christy Baron's "Ain't No Sunshine" vocal on

the Chesky disc. The little bump that Bose programs into the upper bass may not be accurate, but - in headphones, anyway - it massages the eardrum in a most satisfying way and adds some much-needed body to instruments in the lower register. No headphones can really be expected to produce low bass, but when I listened to the Hanson recording on the Bose phones, there was that distinct flavor of drum echo behind some lightly struck kettledrums - whereas on the A-Ts, the sound could have been mistaken for plucked string bass. And when I really was hearing plucked string bass on various jazz recordings through the Bose phones, there was extra impact and body that gave at least an illusion of deeper bass and, perhaps more important, kept me from yearning for more. Don't get me wrong: What was there in the A-Ts was extremely detailed and accurate, but it didn't have the full presence of the QC 3s.

Beyond sound quality, I found both headsets to be about equal in their ability to quash typical background noise on commuter trains and planes I traveled on. The A-Ts, with their closed-ear design, provided better passive noise-reduction - but when turned on, both sets provided an essentially quiet canvas from which the music flowed, and they're considerably better than several less expensive noise-canceling phones I've auditioned.

BOTTOM LINE

Okay, all you inveterate and deep-pocketed iPod fanatics: It's time to line up and pick your Kool-Aid. Will it be the Bose QuietComforts, with their lightweight on-ear design and perhaps less detailed and revealing yet ultimately more balanced and lush sound? Or will you opt for the Audio-Technica QuietPoints, with their more highly detailed and often exhilarating, purist audiophile approach? Not to mention their considerably more attractive price tag. Don't ask me to pick for you - I could no more do that than select your lunch menu. (Will that be the corned beef or the salad, sir?) But

The Short Form

Price \$220 / www.audio-technica.com
330-686-2600

Snapshot

These premium-grade noise-canceling headphones deliver accurate, detailed sound at an attractive price.

Plus

- Outstanding midrange and high-frequency clarity
- Excellent spatial detail
- Operates without battery power if necessary
- Interchangeable plug adapters

Minus

- Could use more bass impact

Key Features

- Large-aperture 40-mm drivers with neodymium magnets
- Flat-folding design for portability
- Hard carry case
- 1.6-meter (5.2-foot) headphone cord
- Adapters for airline and home component use
- Runs on a single AAA battery
- Weight: 7.1 oz (without cable and battery)

what I can say is that if you're in the market for high-quality commuter headphones, both these models are worth your strong consideration and audition. It may come down to what feels comfortable on your head or what just feels right to your ear. But in the end, the Audio-Technica ATH-ANC7 is a serious piece of work at a seriously good price. **S&V**

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