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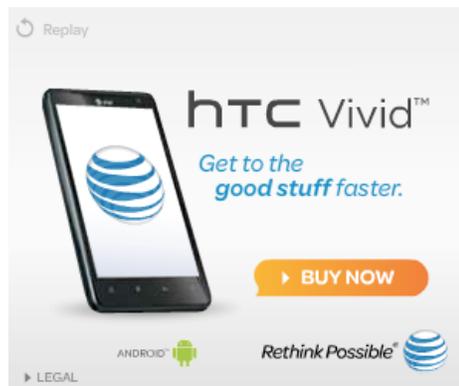
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## Bowers & Wilkins C5 Earphones

Submitted by jwhitakr on Wed, 11/09/2011 - 09:53 [Headphones](#)



★★★★☆ (4.0 star rating)  
Written by: Mikhail Lifshits



Bowers & Wilkins may not be the first loudspeaker company to tackle portable audio in recent years, but it is one with a very rich hi-fi heritage. Known best for the Nautilus, an audiophile-class speaker with an audiophile-class price tag, B&W made waves back in 2007 by embracing the iPod age with the introduction of the Zeppelin iPod dock. Last year saw the release of the company's first headphone, the P5, which received generally positive mainstream reviews and a mixed reception from the audiophile community.

This year brings the company's first in-ear – the C5. The C5 promises to blend style, fidelity, and functionality under an atypically reasonable – both in the world of B&W and the realm of high-end headphones - \$180 price tag. Can the sound of a world-class loudspeaker now fit in the palm of your hand? Let's find out.

### Packaging & Accessories

The packaging of the C5, like the earphones themselves, exudes an air of quality and solidity. The hard cardboard box extols the numerous virtues of the headset and the disposable plastic inserts utilize better materials than some headphones. The packaging is finger-friendly and extracting the manuals and accessories is an easy task. The box contains the following:

- C5 earphones
- Single-flange silicone ear tips (4 sizes)
- Right-angle adapter
- Airline adapter
- Zippered velour carrying pouch
- Warranty statement & manuals

The silicone eartips feature a harder inner core and come in two styles. Three of the eartips are S/M/L-size variations of the standard near-spherical shape. The fourth pair is elongated for a deeper, more stable fit. A pair of dual-flange or foam eartips would have been a nice addition but most should have no problem getting a good seal with the included variety. Not so rosy is the matter of the carrying case – the semi-soft velour pouch is definitely over-engineered. It is difficult to open or close with one hand and the built-in cable management system makes using the carrying case unnecessarily time-consuming. A simple clamshell case would have been just as compact and protective with none of the drawbacks.

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C5 Box

Accessories

**Specifications**

- Driver Type: Dynamic
- Frequency Response: 10 Hz ~ 20 kHz
- Impedance: 32 Ohms
- Sensitivity: 118 dB/v
- Cable length: 4 ft (1.2 meters)
- Input connection: 3.5 mm plug

**Design & Build Quality**

The shells of the C5 are quite large and made entirely out of metal, which gives them an impressive heft. The design is one of clean minimalism with nuanced stylistic touches. The weight and size of the C5 make the earphones feel rock-solid and the angled housings and porous filter add a unique and good-looking modern character.

The cable itself, however, is a bit of letdown – it isn't nearly as soft or flexible as the Kevlar-coated cords on Sennheiser's higher-end earphones or the twisted cables on Westone products and is terminated with a straight plug – an unusual choice for a higher-end product. The 3-button remote unit is responsive but its spherical cross-section and lack of raised buttons can make operating it blindly a bit of a chore. The caps on the end of the 'memory wire' section are not glued in place and can slide down the cord. Mild driver flex - the crinkling sound that results from air pressure in the ear flexing the membrane of the transducer – can also present itself when the earphones are being put on. Such quirks are standard fare for sub-\$100 headphones but seem slightly out of place with the C5, considering how much care clearly went into the design and manufacturing of the earphones.



Overhead view 1



Overhead view 2

**Fit, Comfort & Isolation**

Though comfort is a major marketing push for the C5, the earloop design simply won't work for some ears. Designed to brace the earphones against the antihelix of the ear, the loop can be adjusted in size, though this often requires the use of both hands. The wire is also somewhat stiff and the loop can push unpleasantly on the inside of the ear after a couple of hours. Still, for an earphone with the size and heft of the C5, the fit is very secure - it is even conceivable for the C5 to be used during physical activity.

Wearing the C5 with the cord looped over the ear as is popular with other higher-end in-ears is made impossible by the earloop. Thankfully, however, the planted fit keeps cable contact noise to a minimum. The passive noise isolation, too, is surprisingly good despite the porous filter at the rear. Deeper-sealing aftermarket eartips can improve isolation even further but even with stock tips the noise-blocking ability of the C5 is plentiful for the average commute.





Carrying pouch



Manuals

**Sound Quality**

Testing note: All on-the-go listening was done using a Cowon J3 portable player with a wide range of tracks in mp3 (bitrates ranging from 128 to 320kbps) format. Critical listening was done via an optical-fed iBasso D10 using only WMA and FLAC lossless files.

Not unlike Bowers & Wilkins' P5 on-ear headset, the C5 attempts to balance a relatively mainstream sound signature with audio quality that won't offend discerning listeners. Most noticeable is the emphasized mid-bass – the C5 is a bass-heavy earphone and offers up plenty of power and impact. The bass is on the thick side, giving the earphones a very full and fleshed-out sound even next to similarly bass-heavy sets such as the Beyerdynamic DTX 101 iE. The downside is that the bass is not the tightest or the most controlled, nor is it the deepest and most extended - competitors such as the Sennhesier IE6 manage similar levels of impact while maintaining better resolution and pro-oriented models such as the Future Sonics Atrio offer flatter, more extended response curves.

The midrange of the C5 is overshadowed slightly by the heavy bass and the note thickness causes it to sound less clean and open than some of the audiophile favorites in its price category. Clarity and detail retrieval are decent, however, and the overall tone possesses pleasant warmth. The sound remains smooth well into the treble region- harshness and sibilance are nowhere to be found and the overall treble curve is completely inoffensive, dipping off gently at the top. The top end is smooth and relaxed but again lacks the clarity and sparkle of the more popular hi-fi sets in its price bracket. As a result, much like that of the P5, the tonality of the C5 falls slightly on the darker side of neutral and the earphone lacks a bit of air and transparency.

Also like the P5, the C5 has an average-sized soundstage with good imaging and instrument separation. It's a well-rounded presentation but the sound is not as open as one may expect and positioning precision is not pinpoint-accurate. One of the limitations is the somewhat constrained dynamics – an issue with the P5 headphone as well. On the upside, the C5 extremely forgiving of the contents of an average listener's iPod. Audiophile-oriented headphones and earphones oftentimes do not take kindly to 128 kbps mp3s but the C5 chugs along just fine, and yet leaves no doubt that its fidelity is superior to other fashion-forward in-ears - the Monster Beats by Dre Tour, Klipsch Image S4, and Munitio Teknines, to name a few.

**Bowers & Wilkins C5 Earphones**

The Bowers & Wilkins C5 is a great-looking, well-designed, and well-built product with a few minor quirks. The adjustable earloop, which is responsible for the extremely secure fit of the earphones, can make them time-consuming to insert and isn't necessarily comfortable in the long run. The remote and carrying case, similarly, could have used a design review. As for the sound, it is clearly oriented more at the consumer than the audiophile - while the audio quality of the C5 does surpass mainstream models such as the Beats by Dre Tour and Klipsch Image S4 quite easily, the headset seems content with stopping there. Those looking for the best in balanced and accurate sound won't find it here but if the design of the C5 appeals, there are far worse ways to spend \$180 on a consumer-class audio product.

**Pros:** Secure fit; low cord contact noise; good passive noise isolation; inoffensive sound signature, 2 year warranty.

**Cons:** Earloop design not comfortable for everyone; frustrating carrying case; average sound quality for the price.

**Rating:** 4.0 out of 5

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