



Playing With Pono

WHAT IS IT ABOUT PONO THAT CAUSES SO MUCH IRE, SO MUCH IRRITATION AND SO MUCH NEGATIVITY? STEVE HARRIS LIKES WHAT HE TRIES.....

What is it about Pono? Surely it can't be the shape? After all, most potential customers have moved past the age were they wear skin tight trousers. Should I wish to carry my Pono in my jeans pocket, there's ample room. OK, so the Toblerone shape is unusual, but it makes perfect sense as a desk player, is easy to hold and also acts as a point of differentiation.

Is it Neil Young? Has the old rocker managed to offend or irritate potential customers? Personally I think not. One has to admire the fact that he still can rock, unlike most oldies. Witness his performance at Glastonbury a year or so ago. I saw him live in Hyde Park last year, and it was a great gig, despite the huge venue. And look at his energy, talking up and promoting Pono in the past year.

So what it is about Pono that has brought out the negativity? I feel it may be a mixture of several reasons. The combination of Neil Young and Pono has generated a wider awareness than usual for what is probably seen as an audiophile product. This makes it ideal clickbait. Controversial stories around Pono are almost guaranteed higher traffic

than normal hi-fi stories. (Remember that traffic and hence hopefully clickthrus are the new currency of the web.)

Could it be that some writers are irritated that their precious minority hobby is getting publicity outside of the tiny circle of the specialist press? I suspect that rather too many hi-fi enthusiasts and writers wish to keep their chosen 'hobby' known only to the cognoscenti.

Or could the elephant in the room be hi-res audio? I really don't understand the angst, the bile and even sometimes the fury that has been directed towards hi-res. If you don't like it or don't believe in it, then simply don't buy it. And as for the red herring that some of the content is of dubious provenance, that's absolutely true but it's equally applicable to CDs. Some include MP3 samples and all sorts of other rubbish. But CDs are seen as something different. Weird. I say take a listen; if you like it buy it; if you don't, keep your money in your pocket.

And finally, until around the time of writing this review, samples were as rare as rocking horse

STEVE HARRIS

droppings. I'm not saying that some of the press have been irritated by the lack of review samples, but I've certainly seen it mentioned more than once.

So what is Pono? That's a question I get asked more frequently than I expect. I respond by saying it's primarily a portable music player that is capable of a sound quality far above my *iPhone*. A very KISS [keep it simple, stupid] answer, but one that works for me. And the name Pono? It's Hawaiian for righteous according to Neil Young (and *Wikipedia*).

If I'm honest I own far too much hi-fi equipment and have systems that sound rather good and upwards in most rooms, so I have absolutely no need for a Pono player, or to use Pono as a source component at home. But I do regularly travel on trains and planes, which is great for thinking or for enjoying music without the usual interruptions of work or family life.

Over the past 18 months my portable music system has progressed from *iPhone* with Shure 535 in-ear 'phones, to a Fiio X3 with Bose QC20i noise cancelling in-ears, to now, where I'm totally happy with the Pono/Bose combo. It's not an inexpensive pairing but for me it represents great musical value for money to me. (I wasn't prepared to spend the sort of money an Astell & Kern player would cost because it wouldn't get enough use to make it good value, even if it is better.) I ordered my yellow Pono during March 2014 and received it in December so I took the leap of faith and the risk; some may therefore imply that I'm already favourably predisposed to like it.

A long time ago a hi-fi reviewer told me that all reviewers have biases, but that the good ones knew what they are. The same can be said of people like myself who work in the hi-fi industry. We also have brands we like and dislike (ditto with people). I mention this as the Pono music software (the music app that one might use to update the firmware of a Pono and to add music and playlists) is based on a version of JRiver Media Center. Now I truly and strongly dislike JRiver, I've always preferred its natural and cheaper competitor Foobar. JRiver makes computer cooling fans run at full speed on every lowish power netbook style computer I've tried to run it on. (To be fair I've not tried the new JRiver for Mac but if it's as good as the Pono version I'm not rushing.)

I've had countless hangs: my Pono has not been recognised by the software more times that I care to remember. Check out the Pono forum, and I'm not the only one complaining. However, this software is essential for firmware updates for the player, which have so far improved the usability and also now added DSD file playback. The website at

<https://ponomusic.force.com> isn't much better: it's still US-centric, so purchasing is difficult, and I find navigation a disaster.

Let's get down to the detail. Don't buy a Pono if you are not a geek or at least heading in that direction. And don't expect an easy to use, or an easy-to-load-music experience. Rather than direct downloading, try instead to load music from a laptop on to the internal 64Gb memory or other micro SD cards by drag and drop or copy and paste – sideloading as it's called on the Pono website. It may be slow, but it works.

You are a better man (or woman) than I if you can get the metadata on your music sorted so it works flawlessly, and I pride myself on understanding this sort of stuff.

And don't judge a Pono until you have run it for at least a week (nor take notice of any review that doesn't mention the change during running in). I thought it sounded good when it arrived, but at the time I was using headphones which sounded slightly too rich, and the combination with the rather lightweight presentation of the brand new Pono worked superbly well. A week of running later and the sound quality of Pono had fleshed out and it was now well balanced on my Bose QC20is, and sounded slightly 'fat' on my original circumaural cans. However, the real surprise was heard in the improved handling of micro-dynamics, especially those around voices. Singers who sing with passion were conveyed with passion. Music was far more real and enjoyable than it had been when using my Fiio X3, which sounded a bit flat and uninteresting by comparison. (And, by the way, the Fiio has always sounded rather better than my *iPhone*.)

I also tried Pono into my Naim pre-amp, using a generic 3.5mm jack to DIN cable, and also a special cable supplied as an experiment by Nigel at the Chord Company. (The latter takes the signal from the hot and ground of both of the balanced outputs of the Pono and was definitely an improvement in my system.) I reckon Pono is a good music source for \$400, though it's not in the same league as a Naim ND5 streamer, for example.

To summarise my ramblings: I love my Pono as a portable player; I have made up a compilation of hi-res music that I like on a 128Gb micro SD card. That keeps things varied while travelling, and I love listening to it. The ultimate test is quite simple: can I be bothered to charge it and the headphones before I travel, and can I be bothered to get them out of my case on the train or plane. The answer in both cases is yes. If I hadn't already bought one I would be buying one now that they are becoming available online.

HIFICRITIC
RECOMMENDED

SPECIFICATIONS

Music Formats	FLAC, ALAC, WAV, AIFF, AAC*, MP3, DSD*
Music Resolution	Lossless playback at up to 192kHz/24-bit
Storage	64GB flash memory
Expansion Slot	Supports micro SD cards of up to 128GB
Digital-to-Analog Converter	ESS ES9018M DAC
Battery	2950mAh Li-Ion (max 8 hours playback)
Charger	AC universal adapter (100 - 240 VAC)
USB Cable	USB-to-Micro USB cable
Screen	2.5 inch color touchscreen
Audio Output	2x 3.5mm jacks (four modes)
Weight	130g
Dimensions	13x5x2.5cm
Price	\$399 (USD)

More information is available at <https://ponomusic.force.com>