

**DETAILS**

**PRODUCT**  
Oppo HA-2

**ORIGIN**  
China

**TYPE**  
Portable headphone amplifier/DAC

**WEIGHT**  
175g

**DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**  
68 x 157 x 12mm

**FEATURES**

- Supports PCM audio up to 32-bit/384kHz; DSD up to 11.2MHz
- Two gain settings for optimal headphone matching
- 3,000mAh lithium polymer rechargeable battery

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perma-wrapped in a smart, protective black leather jacket and supplied with a sturdy pair of rubber bands for lassoing the pair together back-to-back when sweet music is required on the move. Some will say: “Why bother?”, which is a fair point. Any smartphone worth its salt will drive a decent pair of cans and, at best, sound very pleasant indeed. But, as with land-based hi-fi, if you want real kicks, it’s best to call in the services of a specialist packing some proper ancillary goodness.

Once known in the UK only for its top-drawer Blu-ray and multi-format DVD players, Oppo is now tapping into the more specific audiophile market and, unsurprisingly, headphones – audio’s only true boom sector – loom large in the Chinese company’s thinking. Its range of models has recently grown to three, two of which, the PM-1 and PM-2, employ planar magnetic drivers and, given a suitably high-quality source, sound pretty darn wonderful. It follows that Oppo would also provide the means to achieve those necessary

**The Oppo is quite comfortably the best we’ve heard at the price, a dream to use**

premium front-end sonics. First came the HA-1, a plushly featured £1,200 headphone amp/DAC (tested back in *HFC* 390) very much intended for desktop or kit rack operation. The considerably less expensive £259 HA-2 is obviously much, much smaller (and slimmer), yet still manages to cram an amazing amount of processing power and functionality into its diminutive frame.

This is largely down to a mobile implementation of the potent DAC used in Oppo’s high-end Blu-ray/multi-format players and the HA-1, but more on that in a moment.

To look at, hold and use, the HA-2 possesses an Apple-esque tactility, solidity and clarity of design that’s immediately appealing. The naked perimeter of the aluminium case is beautifully machined with smoothly bevelled corners and the controls set therein, although tiny, work with satisfying precision. The volume/on-off knob on the top left corner is somewhat larger, but the whole thing is eminently pocketable, even when lashed to a smartphone – although, at 176g, it is quite chunky for its size.

But remarkably versatile. A small slider button on the bottom plate is

# Head rush

Oppo’s latest headphone amplifier is the same size as a smartphone and packs a super-DAC beneath its slim casework. **David Vivian** plugs in and tunes out

**O** guess at least a few of us grew up thinking that Captain Kirk’s flip-open communicator was impossibly cool and properly 23rd Century back in the sixties. But imagine a *Star Trek* script meeting where someone proposed a device with the capabilities of, say, an Apple iPhone 6. They’d have been asked if they needed to lie down, or frisked for hallucinogenic drugs. True, Kirk wouldn’t have known a 1,334 x 750-pixel Retina Display from his left elbow back then, but it’s funny how real life sometimes takes a leap way beyond an imagined future.

Curious, then, that we should find ourselves at a slightly awkward, slightly clumsy juncture where the latest smartphones, for all their multi-tasking magnificence, still need a third party gizmo to fully realise their sonic potential as repositories of hi-res music files and some extra (quality) amplification muscle to exploit that most ancient icon of hi-fi tech: a jolly fine pair of headphones.

At least Oppo has grasped the nettle with its new portable headphone amp/DAC, the HA-2. Not only are its dimensions pretty much identical to those of a regular-sized iPhone 6 (and its own N1 smartphone), it’s also

used to select one of the three inputs. The one located on top of the unit, like the headphone output next to it, is a 3.5mm mini plug socket and doubles as a line-out should you want to use the HA-2 as a DAC in a larger setup. Occupying the bottom side, but nicely spaced, are a USB-A socket for Apple devices and a USB micro-B socket for Android and other smartphones with USB OTG (On-The-Go) or, if you're staying put, a PC.

Being Apple MFi Certified, the HA-2 can send a digital signal via the Lightning-to-USB cable. There are two ways to charge the unit's 3000mAh lithium polymer type battery: via the usual USB laptop hook up or Oppo's own VOOC mains plug, which will give a 75 percent charge in just 30 minutes or a full charge in 90.

The HA-2 is good for 13 hours use if you're plugged into an analogue input and seven hours via the digital USB, but it can also be configured to charge your smartphone by holding down the button that flags up its own remaining battery charge via four green LED dots. Below that, on the

side plate, is a switch that activates the 'bass boost' function and, below that, one that toggles between low and medium gain for matching with headphones of different sensitivities.

As for cables, Oppo provides a Lightning-to-USB-A, USB-A-to-micro-B, micro-B-to-micro-B, and 3.5mm-to-3.5mm along with a mains charger in the box.

So it's all really rather neat and, unquestionably, an ergonomic triumph. But none of this really hints

## The HA-2 possesses an Apple-esque tactility, solidity and clarity of design

at the hi-tech powerhouse that lurks inside. Oppo is keen to point out that the HA-2's Class AB amp uses hand-picked and matched discrete transistors in the output stage, which augers well. The star of the show, however, has to be the ESS ES9018-K2M Sabre32 Reference DAC, which has 32-bit architecture and can handle PCM signals up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD64 and DSD128 files (via USB-B). In other words, like the vastly more expensive Chord Hugo (£1,400, tested *HFC* 386) I've lined up to set the portable headphone amp/DAC bar, it can decode and play all the latest hi-res audio formats, and then some.

### Sound quality

HA-2 powered up and Hugo standing by, I plug in a pair of Oppo's splendid PM-2 headphones (later swapped for AKG Q701s to play fair) and begin the raid on my modest, mostly Naim and Linn-sourced, high-resolution library, supplemented by a rather more generous collection of CD rips – all stored on an iPad Mini 2 rather than iPhone.

Even with CD-quality files it quickly becomes clear from the opening moments that the HA-2's idea of music making is a world away from what the iPad can manage on its own. Bigger for a start (much bigger), instantly making headphone listening a more expansive and enjoyable experience. With the HA-2 in situ, the presentation is appreciably weightier and richer, too, gaining a sense of solidity and authority that – as with being in the presence of live, breathing, musicians – is very powerful.

The best kind of headphone listening should have this almost palpable realism, and here it does.

Orchestral brass at full tilt – always a stiff test – sounds convincingly bright and metallic, but crucially delivers a whole world of harmonics and microdynamic contrasts. With simpler vocal fare there's no doubting the HA-2's sound is detailed, atmospheric and insightful, especially with hi-res tracks and the Oppo cans plugged in, yet it retains an effortless and easy musicality when the slightly drier and more analytical-sounding AKGs are brought into play.

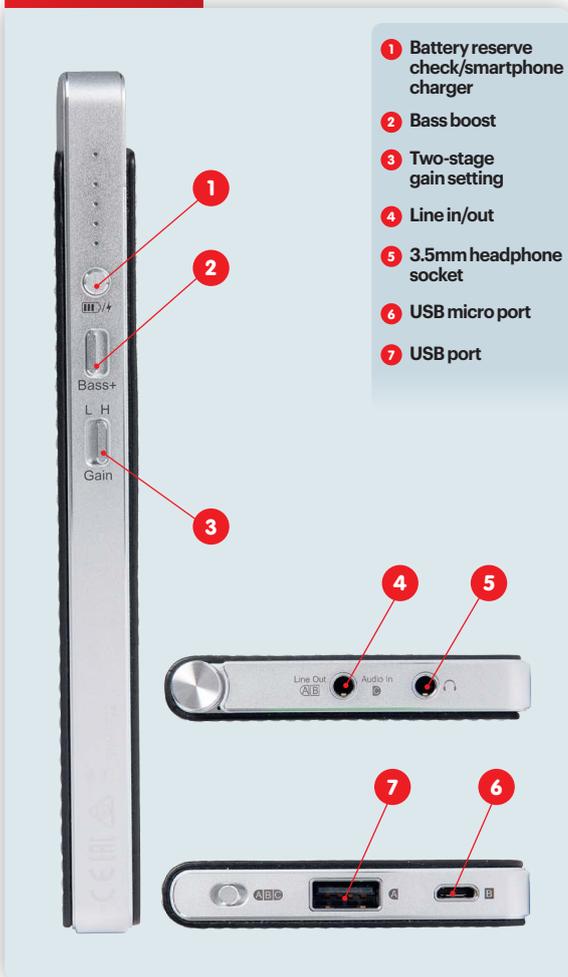
But it's the Oppo combo that's most beguiling: the PM-2s are beautifully voiced and image precisely within a huge soundstage. On Sting's live set, *All This Time*, the rich double bass and subtle piano accompaniment to his rasping vocal on *Moon Over Bourbon Street* are simply mesmerising to hear.

Swapping the HA-2 for the Hugo is fascinating and the vastly more expensive Chord, as well as being much bulkier, doesn't have things all its own way sonically, sounding a tad leaner and less polished than the Oppo. But it's the Hugo's whisper-to-whirlwind dynamics, speed and timing that blow the HA-2 away – in particular the way the Chord copes with the architecture of a performance. Without seeming overblown or in any way over the top, it gives the big picture and presents music in a fashion so natural and coherent you don't just feel you could reach out and touch the musicians, but breathe the same air. Quite something when you're wearing cans.

### Conclusion

If the Oppo HA-2 isn't quite the last word in headphone amplifier/DAC performance, it's comfortably the best we've heard at the price, a dream to use, extremely well made and featured, and it looks very cool. If your phone is as smart as it thinks it is, and overflowing with good tunes, it should enjoy the ride ●

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 Battery reserve check/smartphone charger
- 2 Bass boost
- 3 Two-stage gain setting
- 4 Line in/out
- 5 3.5mm headphone socket
- 6 USB micro port
- 7 USB port

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### FEATURES

★★★★★

##### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Design and size; build quality; powerful DAC; smooth and spacious sound

**DISLIKE:** Could have more attack and punch

**WE SAY:** A gem of a headphone amp/DAC at a very competitive price. Deserves to win plenty of friends

##### OVERALL

★★★★★