



Creek OBH-21 mk2 £325

With a familiar outer shell, the Creek proves that good things really do come in small packages



TWIN BENEFITS

Another design with twin headphone sockets, the Creek is also up to the job of driving two pairs of cans at the same time without issue – once again I'd recommend choosing two identical pairs for best results. The loopthrough function also works perfectly well tested with and without headphones running at the same time. Creek has been doing this for a while and the consistency of the performance shows through.

The star attraction of the OBH-21 is the preamp function, though. Used between the two Cambridge Audio components, the Creek adds a delicacy and refinement to the CXN that it can't always generate itself. The volume control makes for easy fine adjustment of levels and the Creek is unfailingly enjoyable used in this way and warrants consideration as a preamp in its own right.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Creek OBH-21 mk2

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Headphone amplifier

WEIGHT
630g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
95 x 60 x 180mm

FEATURES
● Twin 6.35mm headphone outputs with variable gain
● Impedance range: 8 to 1kohm
● Preamp output

DISTRIBUTOR
Creek Audio

TELEPHONE
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WEBSITE
creekaudio.com

The basic design of the OBH-21 might look familiar, and that's because it's been around for most of this century. The updated mk2 version, while pretty much identical on the outside, has been substantially revised in the pursuit of higher performance. The outside staying the same is no bad thing as externally it still remains an attractive and well proportioned headphone amp.

The Creek uses a 24V wall-wart type supply that has been developed for the entire OBH range. This gives it enough power to provide output to two 6.35mm headphone sockets. These can have their gain and load settings adjusted via dip switches underneath the unit, although once again any changes made apply to both sockets.

Another nice touch is that both the inputs and the outputs on the rear of the amplifier allow it to function as a conventional loopthrough and as a single input preamp, which given how source equipment like the test CXN tends to work these days might come in rather handy.



The OBH-21 mk2 is rather like the rest of the Creek lineup in that it feels very nicely assembled, but in a slightly understated sort of way. Everything feels logical and well laid out and even if the overall design isn't the most exciting thing in the world, it at least feels like it is going to last you a while. With appropriate gain settings applied for the Oppo PM-3 headphones, the Creek hits the test level without difficulty and has plenty more in reserve should you need it.

Sound quality

This is not a product that clubs you over the head with a single aspect of its performance, but this is to slightly miss its strengths. Firstly and tellingly, listening notes for the OBH-21 mk2 are noticeably brief. The Creek manages to engage across all the test pieces and rarely puts much of a foot wrong. The presentation is slightly smaller scale than some of the other models on test here, but not to a point that is constraining.

This also lends the Spektor and Melnikov pieces a wonderful sense of intimacy. Spektor's voice is brilliantly defined and works perfectly against the struck piano keys, which have real weight and depth to them. Melnikov's interpretation of Schumann is also scaled very well and once again the tonality and decay to all of the instruments is consistently and unfailingly believable.

Where the Creek really shines, though, is when you ask it to pick up the pace with the Satriani and Hot Chip tracks. While it remains

scrupulously accurate with superb tonality throughout, it also has a sense of timing and fun that makes this sort of music shine. It sounds fast and engaging where some rivals sound slightly matter of fact and it manages to do this while producing wonderfully deep, clean and detailed bass. This impressive balance of refinement, accuracy and speed makes the OBH-21 mk2 extremely easy to listen to for long periods, but equally something that delivers an effortless five-minute pickup with your favourite track.

The Creek isn't the most feature-packed or visually dramatic product here, but it consistently delivers a sound that is informative and entertaining in equal measure. The feature count isn't huge but the functions it has are certainly useful and combined with the reasonable asking price, it makes for an extremely appealing product ●

HI-FI Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Superbly engaging and entertaining sound; solid build and useful features
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Fractional lack of scale
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A superb all-rounder that delivers excellent sonics at a reasonable price
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



Group test verdict

He's had his head bobbing to the beat with this month's contenders, but to find out which headphone amp gets the nod of approval, it's over to **Ed Selley**

THIS IS A very strong test and no design here is without merit, but some form of ordering needs to be established as per tradition. Of the models here, the Hifiman and the Pro-Ject are the designs that require the most care to get the best from them, albeit for different reasons. The Hifiman is capable of a sumptuously refined performance, but never quite manages to step up a gear to sound truly exciting. The Pro-Ject by contrast is consistently exciting, but can be unruly with less well-recorded material. The additional features of both may be useful, however.

Next up, the Beyerdynamic offering is an immaculately constructed and incredibly competent model that is consistently refined, detailed and accurate. It will drive almost any set of cans that you care to partner it with without strain, but it lacks the little spark of joy that headphones need to have when you want music to be fun as well as informative. For one of higher-priced contenders in the test this isn't ideal.

Considering the Alpha Design Labs' extensive capabilities at such a competitive price is a source of wonderment, and this is a very fine

headphone amplifier indeed. The well-made, clever little GT40a has a detailed, powerful and exciting sound across a wide spectrum of music, and takes third place for its fine composure throughout.

The Graham Slee Solo SRGII gets nudged into second place, but in many regards is the best sounding amp here. The incredible detail retrieval, tonal accuracy and control it shows is deeply impressive and despite the limited functionality, it can justify the highest asking price. This does deny it the top spot, however.



WINNER

The Creek OBH-21 mk2 goes toe to toe with the Graham Slee for sound, but does so with the second lowest price in the test. Throw in the extras - including a great preamp section, lovely build and good looks - and you have a very fine headphone amplifier indeed.



Make/model	Alpha Design Labs GT40a	Beyerdynamic A 20	Creek OBH-21 mk2	Graham Slee Solo SRGII	Hifiman EF100	Pro-Ject Head Box DS
Price	£395	£370	£325	£405	£359	£299
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Performs well as a headphone amp as well as offering much, much more	Great performer, but doesn't have the all-round ability of the best models	A superb all-rounder that delivers excellent sonics at a reasonable price	There are few bells and whistles but this is a very capable headphone amp	A clever and individual product, but not a true all-rounder	A competitive model, but one that needs careful system partnering

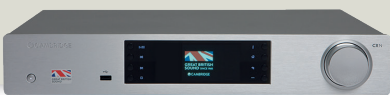
Key features

Headphone jacks	1x 6.35mm	2x 6.35mm	2x 6.35mm	1x 6.35mm	1x 6.35mm	1x 6.35mm
Impedance range	32-300ohm	30-600ohm	8-1kohm	16-600ohm	32-300ohm	30-300ohm
Preamp output	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
Speaker output	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Built-in DAC	24/192 USB	No	No	No	16/48 USB	24/192 coax/USB

TRY WITH THESE

NETWORK MUSIC PLAYER: Cambridge CXN **£700**

The CXN network music player/DAC/preamp does a great many things and it does them extremely well, but it has no headphone socket on board so partnering it with any of the models here will close off this particular shortcoming, and it performs brilliantly so with the Creek. *HFC 399*



HEADPHONE: Oppo PM-3 **£350**

A very keenly priced introduction to the charms of the planar magnetic driver, the Oppo balances the requirements of home and portable use brilliantly, but benefits from the power of a headphone amp to show its best. *HFC 399*



LUXURY HEADPHONE: Fostex TH500RP **£529**

This pro-heritage headphone has an even tonal balance and an engaging musical style across a wide range of material. The open-back, over-ear design uses the company's Regular Phase planar driver tech and its sonic abilities are simply stunning. *HFC 402*

