

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Meze Audio 109 Pro headphones

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**W**e've been following the fortunes of the Romanian personal audio company Meze since its first product was

launched, the 99 Classics of 2015, which we reviewed in Issue 134. Since then, the brand has delivered high-performance headphones and in-ear monitors with a keen sense of design, an obsessive's sense of detail, and an audiophile's sense of hearing. And all that shines through in the new 109 Pro.

In fact, the 109 Pro shares design elements with the 99 Classics, just brought very much up to date and given a touch of elegance that larger price tag can bring. Those common design elements mean cynics might look at the 109 Pro and see an open-backed version of the 99 Classics, and those same cynics would be dead wrong, because this is a completely new design from the diaphragm on out; it's just that those original lines of the 99 Classics still work well enough to be a good foundation for Meze's latest designs.

## Open-backed

The 109 Pro is the current top of Meze's dynamic driver line; the Liric (reviewed in issue 204), Emyrean (reviewed in issue 171) and Elite (reviewed in issue 201) all use isodynamic (also known as 'planar-magnetic') drive units from Rinaro. It's also the first dynamic driver headphone from Meze to feature an open-backed construction.

Meze didn't just use the same 40mm drive unit found in the two current 99 models. It went the harder route, with a 'clean sheet' 50mm dynamic diaphragm. This unit features a lazy-W-shaped dome driver, surrounded by a torus of

Beryllium-coated semicrystalline polymer, measuring just 22 microns. This veined torus helps damp resonance in the driver itself, aided by a copper-zinc alloy stabilizing ring around its outside. This all sits in a CNC milled aluminium frame, which also houses the neodymium magnets. >>



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» This driver sits in an angled frame to align the unit with the listener's ears. This sits in what Meze calls a 'spider shaped structure' and an acoustically transparent grille allowing easy airflow around the driver. The ear is surrounded by a velour ear pad that is echoed in the sustainably harvested black walnut ear-cup surround. Note that black walnut is not black, but the rich semi-matt finish is a superb deep shade of, well, walnut.

A Meze touch common to all its headphones is the self-adjusting headband; a vegan leather padded headband that is floated off two side outriggers on the larger metal headband. While the metal bands can transmit some noise if struck, the overall design is remarkably comfortable, and unless your head is like a watermelon with ears, it really does automatically shape itself to your bonce.

This raw description does the 109 Pro no justice. From opening the elegant black and gold box, handling the moulded carry case to handling the headphones, the look and feel of the 109 Pro is outstanding. Put simply; it

looks more expensive than it is! You can make the 109 Pro look and sound even more expensive by opting for one of Meze's upgrade cables. As it is, though, the 109 Pro comes with two cables as standard; a 1.5m and 3m set, both with 3.5mm TRS jacks at the headphone end and a 3.5mm jack at the amp end. A 6.3mm adaptor is also provided.

#### **The law of unintended consequences**

An unexpected advantage to the 109 Pro's open-backed nature is that it precludes commuter listening. This means most who listen to the 109 Pros will likely use audio systems or dedicated headphone amps. This is a real sonic benefit for the 109 Pro. It's not a hard headphone to drive at all, but the more powerful the headphone amp, the more you get out of the 109 Pro... not all headphones act that way.

Now it's time to address the other set of hair-shirted cynics; yes, a product that looks this good can sound good too! That new driver is a real honey, as it reacts super-fast and extremely precisely to the music playing through the »



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» headphones, and yet it does so without ever sounding bright or brash. I really like headphones that didn't 'shout' detail in a way so many initially impressive headphones do. And the Meze 109 Pro have that easy to listen to performance without the etched, stark or forward sound so common to headphone systems today.

This is an articulate, lithe sounding headphone, completely free from stinging highs. That doesn't mean the headphone rolls off at the top end, more that the new 50mm diaphragm is capable of great extension and any irregularities, distortions, dips or tilts in the high-frequency sound are far out of band. Nothing expresses that high-frequency articulation and brightness-free treble than Joyce DiDonato singing opera and operetta arias on *Stella di Napoli* [Erato]. Her pure, yet immensely powerful mezzo-soprano has bell-like clarity and her diction is nigh-on perfect, all things that the Meze 109 Pro's sound absolutely take in their stride. There's not a hint of brightness; in fact, if anything the 109 Pro is slightly warm. Not in a 'rose-tinted' way, just immensely satisfying sonically.

#### The clue is in the name

Dynamic drivers can be good at dynamic range and the 109 Pro is excellent in this respect. The power of the horn section on 'Memphis Soul Stew' [*King Curtis Live at Fillmore West*, ATCO] really shines through. You know it's coming, but their close-mic'd power still makes you jump, and with a headphone free from brightness and etched sound, you get the full throat of the horns without any aggressive rasping from the headphones.

This track is also a great one to check soundstaging. And very open headphones are particularly good at determining soundstage as it was a simple feed off a desk and unsoftened by too much processing. King Curtis introduces each member of the band in turn, and each appears in his own space around your head. That's a wide and very full stage! Also, when the track whips itself into a frenzy toward the end, you should be able to switch attention from one instrument to another and follow their lines. The more instruments you can focus on, the better the replay chain.

Here, I could follow everyone as they were counted in, and in the end section, I could tease out everyone's playing except occasionally that of the conga player, Pancho Morales. As his playing is hardest to follow (in part because one of the best drummers in history, Bernard Purdie, is also in the band), the conga part only really breaks cover

on super-resolving systems, so 'occasionally' is excellent stuff. I've tried – and repeatedly failed – to try to play Cornell Dupree's guitar part (it's first rate rhythm guitar, with some incredible licks) and the 109 Pro shows you everything in an very easy-going manner, making it all the more frustrating that I just can't play like that!

You don't buy open-backed headphones for their sonic isolation but even by this standard, they are akin to the Sennheiser HD800 models in their lack of isolation. You hear the world around you and the world around you hear everything you do. Also, those who want their headphones to pump out a heavy bass, this is a more subtle performer; bass is tight and tidy rather than big and bloated. And of course, there is more information and bandwidth to be had if you take the next step to planar-magnetics, including those in the Meze line. But, know that if you do, you'll probably need to spend double the amount you spent on the 109 Pro to get a material improvement without compromise.

I've saved the best until last. What the Meze Audio 109 Pro does so well is create a sound that supports long-term listening. To be honest, I was surprised at this because I thought the velour pads would feel a little hot and uncomfortable after a few hours, but I could wear these headphones for hours at a time, thanks to both the easy way they hang on your head and the warm, inviting sound of the headphones themselves. These are not the headphones for the casual listener. They are for those who like to drink deep from their pool of music. So long as everyone else in the room shares your tastes, these are a joy to use. +

#### Technical specifications

**Type** open-backed dynamic headphone system

**Transducer Size** 50mm

**Frequency Response** 5Hz–30KHz

**Sensitivity** 112dB SPL at 1KHz, 1mW

**Impedance** 40 Ω

**Ear-Cups** Black Walnut Wood

**Weight** 375 gr (13 oz) without cables

**Price** £769

**Manufacturer** Meze Audio  [mezeaudio.eu](https://mezeaudio.eu)

**UK distributor** SCV Distribution

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