The Audeze LCD-i3 is the company’s latest in-ear open design planar magnetic monitor pulling from the design of their flagship LCD-i4 and the low-impedance of the iSINE range. It is priced at $899.
I’ve always been a fanboy of team Audeze and I am proud to admit it. There is something about their house sound that I find extremely appealing. Naturally, with the release of their new portable i3 Planar IEM, the very same can be said once again. The journey continues along the hidden paths of bliss that Audeze provides. Take a walk with me and find out why I enjoy their newest $899 portable Planar and semi-open back IEM.

The Box and Build

Similarly to the iSine LX and the iSine20 that I’ve reviewed in the past, their stock Audeze IEM box is nearly the same. The hard plastic and cardboard presentation is actually pretty stellar. I really enjoy being able to unfold open the box like it was holding a yummy treat inside and technically, it does.

The hard clear plastic cover firmly holds everything inside and snaps into place. It comes with some nifty and new and improved ear guides that I find more comfortable than usual, some excellent tip selections, the groove tips are lovely, as well as a nice carrying pouch to hold everything nearly together on the go.

Beyond that, a Cipher Lightning iOS cable is included, along with a Bluetooth module cable and a standard 3.5mm as well. This is an absurd amount of goodies for the price and I am astounded at the thought of a portable Planar Bluetooth cable!
I can honestly tell you, it is lovely to be able to use my iPhone via the Lightning cable and tackle DSP all day long, considering that I am a buff of personalized sound alteration, but, I am also a huge fan of current Bluetooth tech. We are going places and they are very, very good places, indeed.

![Image of IEM housing](image.jpg)

**Comfort**

Naturally, the IEM housing itself is rock solid as well, with some plastic on the exterior for a lightweight appeal, it doesn’t bother me at all. The inner mesh grill is aluminum and puts out a very high-quality vibe.

In this case, due to the size of the IEM, I don’t want a metal chassis. I prefer rigid plastic and I think this was an extremely wise design choice by Audeze. They could have easily made this mostly metallic and I think the overall comfort would have fallen severely if that were the case. You’d think they would be cumbersome, due to their size, but, they aren’t.

They are lightweight for the most part and rest well on my ear, thanks to the newish design of the ear hooks/guides. Another plus would be the design of the cable, the flat ribbon design lends less of an intrusive experience. Overall, I consider it a comfortable fit and enjoyably visually pleasing as well.
Cipher Lightning Cable

Audeze DSP

Via the iOS Lightning port, you can grab and use Audeze’s app for playing with various premade DPS functions and I have to say, from the bottom of my heart, thank you to Audeze. I love the neutral sound, clinical and accurate. Don’t get me wrong. I enjoy that just as much as vividly warm. However, I think there are times where I want clinical precision, but there are also times where I want to crank up an area of the frequency and get more out of it.

With the LCD-i3, I am able to obtain that and alter the stock sound to ‘yummy levels’ when I want and how I want. This is the future. As much as I love to experience the stock design of a product and how a designer wants a product to sound, that product is still mine and if I want more bass, I should be able to have it. This is why I talk about responsiveness to EQ in nearly every review I post and why I think it is so important.

Some products simply do not respond to EQ alteration when you boost any given area of the frequency response. Others respond vividly well and you can obtain more or less with just a 1-2dB incremental change that results in something audibly different.

Some products require a lot of dB drop off or boosting to hear something audibly change in the experience. Audeze’s DSP presets and functionality via the App and Lightning Cipher cable is a musicality lover’s absolute dream in that regard.

HiBy MSEB

It wasn’t until Hiby and their portable players that I’ve noticed MSEB and how amazing that is over a stock EQ. The future is in DSP and apps like this that let the product shine in pretty much
any variant of music you wish. You can get clinical and flat sound, or you can rock out with a boosted flavor. The choice is yours and at $899, I expect it these days. Team Audeze delivers here.

My problem? I just wish I had more internal memory on my iPhone. Ha! I can obtain excellent DSP alterations with the iOS device as my source, which is something I could not do before Audeze’s Cipher cables were released with some of their headphones.

**Bluetooth**

Something happened in the few years with regard to Bluetooth function and what it is capable of. aptX, (and LDAC), for example, changed the name of the game and I am beyond elated to experience this level of fidelity on the go.

I have a set of $149.99 Bluetooth Apple Airpod-ish IEM’s that I am reviewing and I was immensely impressed by them, they are lovely and for the price, I could not believe how great they sounded. Previously, I was impressed by AKG’s N5005 and how that IEM offered a Bluetooth cable option. On the go never sounded better than that in recent years and now I have a new MVP on the field that just walked in and started messing with the rest of the players? Awesome.

**Bluetooth Options**

This LCD-i3 sounds marvelous via Bluetooth. I am not able to squeeze out the goodness of the Cipher cables offering, so I am suggesting you pair this LCD-i3 with an excellent DAP that has MESB on it if you run via Bluetooth and you don’t use the Audeze Apps on your phone (meaning you prefer portable music DAP’s and not phones). Otherwise, if you don’t, you’ll
miss out on personalization potential and that cannot be done with most stock software-based EQ systems in portable music players.

The MSEB DSP’s can offer more and are a better option for wireless usage. The fidelity factor, of course, is audibly inferior to the wired/cable options for the LCD-i3. But still, wireless LCD-i3? Yes, please. It still sounds fantastic and I am fairly certain that the LCD-i3 is the absolute echelon and cosmic high tier deity of the portable wireless experience, at least, that I’ve ever heard.

It absolute takes the crown as the best portable wireless IEM that I’ve had the pleasure of experiencing. Pairing is fast and stable, I’ve not had a single cut out with my Android phone, my iPhone or my TV. Being able to pair to my Sony 900e TV without cables is a blessing. I don’t need to say more.

**Sound Impressions**

**Bass**

The stock experience on the LCD-i3 is what I would consider flat and endearing. As with the LCD-i4 and the iSine20, I’ve found that the LCD-i3 is something that offers a relatively neutral physical experience with the potential to blend more in with moderate levels of DSP when needed.

You’ll need to boost if you want a bassy experience. If not, don’t worry, the bottom end is vividly clean and audibly so over my custom CIEM Nemesis, which I thought was very clean and clear at nearly double the price of this LCD-i3.

Right now, the purity factor experience of the LCD-i3 is the best in an IEM that I have on hand. It is noticeably more clean and “pure” to my ear than anything I’ve reviewed in the IEM tier here on Headfonics. More so, that can alter with physical quantity via DSP if you need it.

**Bass DSP**

However, not a ton. The response to boosting the bass experience is what I would consider a moderately responsive quality, which is still solid for the price. What that means is that I require more than a few dB of boosting via MSEB in my HiBy R6 portable player to achieve what I desire.

Via the Audeze App with a lightning connection, I can really alter the tonality and physicality factor of the LCD-i3, but I am not able to achieve any basshead level experience. I think that is for the better with this product anyway.

The reason being I would want a pure feeling no matter what and I am more than happy sacrificing bass head level response to achieve something of a fidelity factor on par with this LCD-i3. Thankfully, the experience is not harsh or blaring, ever. The impact and physicality factor is moderate and enjoyable, it is neither too soft, nor is it vividly engaging or fatiguing.
Mids

The LCD-i3 opts for the middle of the road path, which again, is what I prefer in this price tier. I want options and matchability, not specialized sound in this price tier. What I do not want a wide sounding IEM only, nor a very forward one. I want one that plays well with most genres, most tracks and most DSP/EQ setups that I can muster.

Whoever is designing and implementing products at Audeze, really understands this concept. They could have gone the classic LCD-3 route and generated an IEM with a very forward, luscious midrange. They could have gone the LCD-2 route with something a little more relaxed feeling, but they went right down the middle and that is the best route to take when regarding a set that is clearly set up for optimized and personalized sound.

Physicality

The midrange feels of a moderate physicality and I do have some IEM’s that portray a sense of superior density. I enjoy that type of a sound and I like the typical full-size Planar vibe that offers, but this LCD-i3 is more subdued and less like the larger sounding Planars, more like the very experience custom IEM hybrid drivers in physicality factor.

By this, I mean that, for example, my CIEM called the Nemesis from Empire Ears, sounds and feels of a much more dense appeal in literal physicality factor. The LCD-i3 has a more reserved and pure feeling. That is not a negative trait. The Nemesis can get too thick sometimes, especially so on the low end, which by comparison to the LCD-i3, sounds much heavier than said LCD-i3.
The midrange, however, feels more tactile and vibrant, more energetic and prone to instances of subtle detailing in the LCD-i3. I enjoy that, it reminds me of the old and original LCD-3, which is still my favorite Planar.

**DSP**

I am not really able to do much for the midrange in terms of tactility or placement via any DSP. The midrange feels a bit stubborn in that regard so if you wanted a more forward appeal, or a more distant feel, you might need heavy alteration. Otherwise, the stock sound is generally what you stick with throughout the DSP usage, until you really start to change something in a dramatic variant.

**Treble**

The top end of the LCD-i3 is polite and gently sweet. I consider more than neutral and well into the subset of musical. That is before any customized sound properties are added. I am so happy with the stock treble experience that I try not to touch it.

Subjectively, I love right where it tends to stay and it isn’t until I use very old, badly recorded tracks, that I drop in some DSP via the Lightning cable and App, or my R6’s MESB when I am using 3.5mm connections.

The treble experience is quiet on any hiss or static, it is not prone to ground noise either via your hardware. I don’t wince often, even with tracks I know to be extremely harsh for me. So, to my ear, the top end of the LCD-i3 (without any active DSP or EQ) is gently setup and portrayed. It has a very soft sheen to it, there is some brightness, but the sparkle factor is sublime at $899.
I enjoy it a lot with big band tracks from Tony Benett and Lady GaGa’s Jazz album, which really shines with the level of musicality and the physical impact they used to record the album. It really complements the physical traits of the LCD-i3 and in some rare track cases when it doesn’t, I can make the LCD-i3 complement it.

**Staging**

Well, this LCD-i3 is an open back and has a huge penchant for airiness. I am absolutely in love. As a soundstage buff, first and foremost I enjoy the expansive and free feeling sound more than any other trait and to have this on the go is an absolute godsend. I cannot express how happy this makes me feel, as someone who loves staging and open, airy feel to the musical experience.

The size of the drivers and the open back nature make me feel like there are small speakers floating on my ear and when I go for walks outside or a bike ride in the morning, I am simply in another place and do not have the closed-in, claustrophobic feel of a closed system that usually comes with typical IEM’s.

**Imaging**

The imaging on this LCD-i3 is fantastic. The depth of field factor is just good though, where the height, width, and separation of instruments may be among the best in an IEM that I’ve ever heard, I do feel the depth of field factor is the weak link in the chain, although, still very nice.

Yes, some custom CIEM’s are definitely superior here in that stage-forward sense, but most of them lack the realistic density and feel the LCD-i3 offers. Most offer either too little or too much in the way of density factor and coherency. The LCD-i3 doesn’t have that issue.

The imaging property as a whole experience is simply one of the best I’ve ever heard. Stellar, simply stellar for anything on the go and to be able to hear outside noises while I am walking around outside only makes the air factor feel that much more effortless and expansive.
Our Verdict

This is my new favorite IEM, there is no doubt about it. It is immensely difficult for me to go back to anything else at the moment, due to the epic airiness factor of the imaging experience of the LCD-i3. If I am able to, I tend to adjust DSP on each album that pops in my playlist, which adds to the musicality experience for me as a listener. I am able to customize. I am not nearly as limited by the stock sound. If I want the stock sound, I can have it and it sounds lovely as is. If I want more where some tracks benefit from some alteration, I can have that too. More so, the experience requires no amplification at all and right out of my Hiby R6, right out of my iPhone and right off the Bluetooth module offers plenty physicality factor. I simply do not need amplification, just a good portable source and nothing more.

Team Audeze has done a marvelous job. If I had a choice to personally purchase an IEM that wasn’t a custom CIEM, this would be it at the moment. I am impressed by what customization this LCD-i3 can offer as well as the immensely fantastic airy qualities it offers.

For me, I enjoy that open feel and to have it in this type of abundance is just an absolute pleasure to use. If you have roughly $900 to spend on just a portable IEM, I’ll be recommending this to you. Of course, it is open back, so if you are okay with some sound leakage around you, then this is probably the current best option out there that I am aware of in the price tier.

LCD-i3 Specifications
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**Tonality**: 9.2
**Build Quality**: 8.9
**Comfort & Fit**: 8.8
**Matchability**: 9.3

9.1