

# T+A Solitaire P-SE open-back headphones

by Simon Lucas



**M**y head's metaphorical size is open to question, but I am confident there's nothing unusual about its literal size. I'm an average height and average weight, and I reckon my head is of pretty average dimensions.

So, when the most immediately notable thing about the Solitaire P-SE headphones by T+A is just how swamped they make my unremarkably sized head feel, I can't help but worry for those people blessed with smaller heads than mine. Presumably T+A hasn't set out to exclude whole swathes of the population from Solitaire P-SE ownership. However,

unless "must feel large" is high on their list of new-headphones requirements, I fear lots of prospective customers will reject the Solitaire P-SE when they put a pair on (or, more accurately, over) their head.

Rejecting the headphones, however, would be a dreadful pity because in pretty much every other respect the T+A Solitaire P-SE are brilliantly accomplished headphones ▶

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▶ that are an unalloyed joy in listening, which is just as it should be, given the asking price.

Before we even get to the sound they make, though, T+A has done its utmost to make that price seem perfectly reasonable. As is unerringly the case with this German manufacturer (whose company name stems from ‘Theory and Application’, and most certainly not from any baser Miss World-related derivation), the Solitaire P-SE are painstakingly conceived, specified and manufactured. By the time T+A has explained the processes behind these headphones, three grand feels almost like a bargain.

Indeed, the £3,000 P-SE seems a bargain compared to the £5,000 Solitaire P headphones T+A has used as a jumping-off point. Everything’s relative, after all. T+A has replaced the aluminium elements of the Solitaire P with a “high-quality synthetic compound” alternative on the outside. It’s chamfered the ear cups. But as far as compromises are concerned, this seems as far as T+A is prepared to go.

The Solitaire P-SE are a planar-magnetostatic design, just like the Solitaire P. The 110 x 80mm oval transducer is based on the single-row magnet array of the Solitaire P’s TPM3100 transducer – but here it features entirely new filters and membrane. Dubbed TPM2500, the transducer’s neodymium magnets are carefully shaped and matched in length to suit the shape of the diaphragm – the intention is to negate air turbulence and maintain consistent airflow. Also, the gnat’s-ass tolerances of the design of its retaining rings and magnet mount mean the diaphragm’s position is always accurately maintained – so very high (and distortion-free) sound pressures should be achievable.

The earcups behind which the TPM2500s do their thing are (like every other

component part of the Solitaire P-SE) designed, developed and hand-made in Germany. At the point of contact, they’re made of allergen-free velour and synthetic leather. The result is an extremely comfortable experience for the wearer right up until the moment they become uncomfortably warm. Some headphone ear cushion designs seem able to dissipate body heat almost indefinitely; the Solitaire P-SE’s ear cushions seem to absorb body heat and then give it right back, with interest.

The detachable connecting cable runs to both earcups, and it’s of oxygen-free copper with a silver layer – the sheath shielding the line is robust, and about as resistant to tangling as these things ever get. As standard, the Solitaire P-SE comes with both a cable terminating in a 6.3mm barrel jack and an alternative ending in a 4.4mm Pentaconn connector. If that doesn’t suit your purposes, the 4.4mm cable set can be swapped for a lead terminating in a four-pin XLR connector.

It should be pointed out here (if it hasn’t become obvious already) that the P-SE are an assertively open-backed configuration, only a few orders of magnitude quieter from the outside than they are from the inside. There are courtesies involved in T+A Solitaire P-SE usage; they all centre around asking if anyone, anywhere in the same building, will be distracted or offended by the sound leaking promiscuously from the earcups. Happily, for the purposes of this test, no objections were too strongly forthcoming, so the headphones were attached (at various junctures) to an EarMen TR-Amp, a Chord Hugo, and the headphone output of a Naim Uniti Star (using a Grado Prestige 3.5mm – 6.3mm adaptor).

Starting with the heartfelt and wonky charms of Palace Brothers’ *There Is No One What Will Take Care Of You* [Drag City] lets the Solitaire P-SE explain quite a bit about their modus operandi. Theirs is a startlingly spacious and open presentation, one which manages to put appreciable distance between each element of a recording without making them sound in any way estranged from each other. There’s enough space available on the soundstage for each instrument (keening organ and flat, dry electric guitar are strongly to the fore here) to be described in full. Also, the Solitaire P-SE do outstanding work in reporting on the harmonic dynamics that make the leading edge of each strum or key-press distinct from the one that precedes or follows it. The co-dependence of bass and drums is explicit, allowing the timing to seem natural and unforced even when the recording (as it does quite often) threatens to shake itself to pieces.

The approximate nature of Will Oldham’s voice, and the way he harmonises with himself, is communicated in full – there’s an endearing quality to his phrasing and almost-but-not-quite pitch control that the T+A recount ruthlessly. But in the manner of a court stenographer, the Solitaire P-SE don’t judge or draw conclusions – they simply hand over the facts verbatim. ▶



▶ Fairport Convention's *Liege & Lief* [Island] is an altogether more accomplished piece – in technical terms at the very least. It's an antique recording, admittedly, but the T+A gives its virtues – warmth of tonality and virtuosity of playing, for instance – complete expression. These aren't the first headphones to reveal that Sandy Denny is without meaningful peer when it comes to vocal technique and eloquence, but you'll have to go a long way to find an alternative pair (at any price) that serves up her extraordinary purity of tone, effortlessness of delivery and humbling articulacy any more explicitly.

It's the coherence of the T+A presentation that is, perhaps, the single most winning aspect of the Solitaire P-SE sound. The lowest frequencies are resonant, textured, packed with momentum and yet rigorously controlled – one listen to AceMo' *Where They At???* [Vanity Press] may make T+A's claim of frequency response down to 8Hz look like a false alarm. Still, it also confirms just who's in charge of the low-end stuff. The journey to the top of the frequency range (quoted as an equally fanciful 45kHz) is as smooth as velvet, and no area is underplayed or overstated. If "impartiality" is a trait you value, the Solitaire P-SE have you covered.

And it's not like this comes at the expense of dynamism or excitement, either. The P-SE may aim to be neutral, but that doesn't mean these headphones are dispassionate – the aforementioned AceMo tune makes it obvious. There's plenty of energy and attack to the T+A sound – but they're so adept in every other respect too, it's possible to mistake their balance and even-handedness for reticence initially. Not for long, though.

It turns out there are only two significant barriers to a long and undoubtedly fruitful relationship with the T+A Solitaire P-SE headphones; price and physical size. These impediments are difficult hurdles to surmount if your head – or your bank balance – is the wrong size.

However, not everyone will be intimidated by the either of these aforementioned barriers. These are the headphonistas; the personal audio sound-hounds for whom only the best is good enough. And for them, the T+A

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Circumaural, open-back, planar magnetostatic headphone

**Drivers:** Full-range, low-mass, planar magnetic drivers

**Frequency response:** 8Hz–45kHz

**Impedance:** 45 Ohms nominal

**Sensitivity:** Not quoted

**Distortion:** Less than 0.015% @ 100dB

**Accessories:** Unbalanced 6.35 mm, balanced 4.4 mm Pentaconn or XLR 4-pin cable

**Weight:** 440g (excluding cable)

**Price:** £3,000

**Manufacturer:** T+A elektroakustik GmbH & Co. KG

**URL:** [ta-hifi.de](http://ta-hifi.de)

**UK Distributor:** The Audio Business Ltd

**Tel:** +44 (0) 1249 704669

**URL:** [theaudiobusiness.co.uk](http://theaudiobusiness.co.uk)

Solitaire P-SE is a strong contender in 'best of breed' for open-back planar magnetic headphones. In pure sound terms, few come close. +