

# personal tech



## Headset to enhance listening Able Planet's Clear Harmony and Logitech's Notebook Headsets sound good

Globe and Mail Update

Headphones come in an astonishing array of styles, but two recent features have become dominant: the addition of noise-cancelling technology and the amazing rise in popularity of behind-the-head headphones.

The two sets under review are excellent examples of each technology, although that's just about where the similarity ends. Able Planet's noise-cancelling stereo headphones are designed for listening to music, especially by people with some hearing loss, while Logitech's product, which has added a microphone, is designed primarily for notebook users, but is also meant for listening to music or playing games.

### **Clear Harmony with Linx Audio Headset, from Able Planet** [\\$299 \(U.S.\) at AblePlanet.com](http://AblePlanet.com)

Able Planet, a company that was spun out of Colorado State University in 2003, is building its reputation on a technology it has developed that improves the quality of sound in headsets and telephones.

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At left, Able Planet's Clear Harmony headphones and the Logitech Premium Notebook Headset

Called Linx, the technology is a coil that helps individuals with moderate to severe hearing loss, which it does by modifying the audio signal to help people listen to a greater variety of consumer electronics.

Quality of sound is one of those things that causes fistfights to break out among aficionados, like those between Mac and Windows partisans. And you'd think that mucking about with the audio signal to assist the heard of hearing would unnecessarily distort that signal, but with Able

Planet, it doesn't — at least not to my ears, which are showing signs of reduced circumstances, perhaps after a certain Led Zeppelin concert in 1975.

Able Planet starts from the premise that hearing loss associated with age starts by damage to higher frequencies, especially with sounds such as "f," "s" and "th," which become difficult to discern from each other. The Linx system creates high-frequency harmonics to enhance the quality of sound and speech in a way that increases "the perception of loudness" without increasing the volume. Able Planet says it's like the difference between a C note and a C chord played on a piano; the harmonics of the chord make the audio seem louder because it has a broader range of frequencies.

As a side benefit, Able Planet notes that using this system will prompt people with hearing loss to turn the volume down instead of up, thereby diminishing the possibility of further damage.

This is not all that makes the Clear Harmony audio headset interesting. The company has added noise-cancelling technology as well. The technology, which has been around for a few years already, uses a microphone to pick up sounds from outside the headphones, and generates an inverse signal to cancel them.

The best example is the noise of airplane engines or people on a crowded bus, which can be cut back sharply by flipping a switch on the headset, allowing the listener to enjoy the music and eliminate the worst of the ambient racket. Turning on the noise-cancelling switch without listening to music demonstrates how dramatic the technology can be.

The headphones come with their own zippered and padded carrying case, with a removable cord and one-eighth and one-quarter-inch stereo plug adapters and an in-line volume control with mute button. The ear cups are big enough to accommodate most hearing aids as well.

**Premium Notebook Headset, from Logitech**  
**[\\$41.99 \(U.S.\) plus shipping at Amazon.com](#)**

Logitech designed its USB-analogue headset specifically for notebook users for Skype telephone calling, Internet voice chat, gaming, and music, with a good frequency response of 20 to 20,000 Hz for the headset (anyone whose ears are acute enough to hear beyond that range is rare), and 100 to 10,000 Hz for the microphone.

Here, Logitech embedded the noise-cancelling technology into the microphone, not the headphones, which is thoughtful for the person on the other end of the line, a rare consideration in a product. Like Able Planet's headphones, Logitech's also come with their own (hard shell) carrying case and fold flat in it. The cord has in-line volume and mute controls, as well as an analogue-to-USB adaptor that allows a listener to be flexible when it comes to the devices that the headset can be used with.

They are also in the behind-the-head style that's been pretty popular these days, although I know many people (myself included) who can't wear them; in my case all I need to do to let them fall from my head is to look up, and the headphones slip off my ears.

But I have to hand it to Logitech here, which has thought about this problem. The earpieces are adjustable; they slide back and forth, allowing them to adjust to different heads.

There's little question that shelling out more than \$300 for Able Planet's headphones has little justification for people with good hearing, who would be quite happy with Logitech's much less expensive set.

But for those who care about their ears or are having trouble with them, \$300 is a cheap way to enjoy music without having to pump up the volume.

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