

WESTONE TRUEFIT 4 UNIVERSAL-FIT EARPHONES

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Playback greatly admires Westone's superb ES5 custom-fit in-ear monitors ([click here for our review](#)), but we also understand that some music lovers would prefer to go with universal-fit in-ear 'phones rather than going down the custom-fit path. Part of this has to do, we think, with some listeners' reluctance to have custom ear-mold impressions taken (a

process that admittedly looks a bit scary and feels weird for first-timers, but that actually doesn't hurt a bit), and part has to do with price (since custom-fit monitors cost not just a little but a *lot* more than most universal fit models). But having looked at and listened to things from both sides of the universal-fit vs. custom-fit divide, we're still left with one key question:

overview

Consider this in-ear headphone if: you value well-balanced performance and an earphone that does all things well. Look at the TrueFit 4 if you want a universal-fit model that offers the kind of powerful, intimate, and vivid sonic presentation that rivals, though it does not quite equal, the performance of today's finest custom-fit in-ear monitors, but for hundreds of dollars less. Note, too, that the TrueFit is easy to insert, comfortable to wear, and can be fitted out (via interchangeable eartips) for use by a wide variety of listeners (something no custom-fit monitor can claim).

Look further if: you want the highest possible levels of sonic detail, resolution, and noise isolation. To get those things, you'll eventually need to step up to a full-blown custom-fit in-ear monitor. But be aware that custom-fit monitors, great though they can be, cost significantly more and are by definition less flexible (because they're designed to fit one and only one listener).



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can *anybody* build a universal-fit earphone whose sonic sophistication seriously rivals that of today's greatest custom-fit in-ear monitors? Interestingly, Westone may have an answer for us all.

The Westone TrueFit 4 (\$449) is the world's first three-way, four-driver, universal-fit earphone, and as such is one of the—if not *the*—most sophisticated universal-fit earphones ever created. In simple terms, its mission is to come as close as possible to the sound quality of the firm's top-tier custom-fit models, yet at a much more manageable price point. Does it succeed? I think it certainly comes very close. But, even if the TrueFit 4 is not quite able to challenge Westone's top-tier custom-fit monitors for absolute sonic supremacy, it easily earns bragging rights as one the finest—if not *the* finest—universal-fit earphones on the planet.

FEATURES

- The world's first three-way, four-driver, universal-fit earphone.
- Uses four balanced armature-type drivers (two bass drivers, one midrange drive, and one high-frequency driver per earpiece).
- Fitted with Westone EPIC signal cables, which Westone describes as “a supple braided design (that) insures comfort and resists tangles.” Note, too, the Westone now offers a version of the TrueFit 4 that comes with detachable, user-replaceable signal cables.
- Shares the same basic earpiece shell design as used on Westone TrueFit 3 earphone.

Though Westone does not particularly tout this feature, the fact is that the TrueFit shell shape is ergonomically designed so that it A) is very easy to handle, insert, and adjust, and B) seems to fit the natural curvature of most wearer's outer ears. One further benefit of the TrueFit shape is that it naturally lends itself to over-the-ear cable routing.

- Comes with an excellent and extensive collection of eartips, as detailed under COMFORT FACTOR & ACCESSORIES, below. Odds are that one (or more) of the provided eartip options will work beautifully for you.
- Apart from its extensive eartip collection, the TrueFit 4 comes with a useful set of other accessories including a well-made travel case, a cleaning tool, a line attenuator, and a ¼” phone jack adapter.

SONIC CHARACTER

The TrueFit 4 is among the most accurately balanced in-ear headphones *Playback* has yet sampled. Perhaps the only slight deviation from strict textbook accuracy would be a very subtle hint of bass emphasis, which we regard as an intelligent design compromise that actually helps the headphone sound *more* accurate in environments where there is low-frequency noise present (which, come to think of it, is most environments).

One area of the audio spectrum that the TrueFit 4 handles particularly well is the potentially tricky upper midrange/treble region—a region many earphones get wrong. What the TrueFit 4 manages to do

RATINGS

(relative to comparably priced headphones)

tonal balance

frequency extremes

clarity

dynamics

comfort/fit

sensitivity

value (true, the TrueFit 4 is expensive, but it's worth the money)



is to sound articulate and well extended, yet without becoming edgy, brittle or overly bright. Similarly, it also manages to serve up a welcome touch of treble smoothness, but not at the expense of sounding dull or rolled off.

But good though the TrueFit 4's tonal balance is, its greatest strengths may lie in other more qualitative aspects of sound reproduction. The TrueFit 4 actually offers a well-integrated package of sonic virtues, including good transient speed, high levels of resolution and detail, a highly articulate sound overall, and excellent handling of both large- and small-scale dynamic contrasts. Put these qualities together and you wind up with a sound that is remarkably vivid and vibrant—the very words I would use to describe the sound

specs/pricing

Westone TrueFit 4 Universal-Fit In-Ear Headphones

Type: Three-way, four-driver universal-fit in-ear headphone

Driver Complement: Four balanced armature-type drivers (two woofers, one midrange, one tweeter)

Accessories: See above

Frequency response: 10Hz – 18 kHz

Weight: Not specified

Sensitivity: 118dB/mW

Impedance: 31 Ohms

Warranty: 1 year, parts and labor

Price: \$449 MSRP

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of good custom-fit in-ear monitors.

Does this mean the TrueFit 4 is truly the equal of custom-fit monitors? Not exactly, and here's why. First, the TrueFit 4's noise isolation, though very good as universal-fit earphones go, is not as good as the isolation afforded by custom-fit designs (nor should we expect it to be, given the huge price differentials involved). Similarly, the TrueFit 4's sound, whose articulation and vividness place it near the top of the universal-fit class, nevertheless

falls a little short of the performance that, say, Westone's nearly twice as expensive ES5 custom-fit monitors can deliver.

But let's put things in perspective; the TrueFit 4 is easily one of the two best universal-fit earphones *Playback* has ever tested (the other would be the also superb Audeo Phonak PFE 232). In our experience, only a tiny handful of competitors TrueFit 4 can begin to match the Westone's extremely well rounded performance. Thus, if you want a big taste of what custom-fit sound is about, but without paying the inevitable custom-fit price, consider the TrueFit 4, which really does push the limits of universal-fit technology.

ANCILLARY EQUIPMENT

Most of my listening tests for this review were conducted using an iPod Classic loaded with lossless files, with signals routed through a Moon Audio Silver Dragon LOD (line out dock) cable to an ALO Audio Rx MkII portable headphone amplifier.

Additional listening involved lossless digital files played from Windows PC through a Furutech GT2 USB cable to a NuForce Icon HDP USB DAC/headphone amplifier.

Still other tests involved CDs and SACDs played through a Musical Fidelity kW SACD player, with signals routed through Rega Couple interconnects to a Burson Audio HA-160 headphone amplifier and (often) through a Burson Audio AB-160 tube buffer.

MUSICAL EXAMPLES

A test track that has been in heavy rotation

on by iPod for the past several months is "Joanni" from Kate Bush's *Aerial* [Sony]. The song can be viewed as a hymn of sorts to Joan of Arc, but with a distinctly modern twist in the form of a driving, heavily syncopated, and eerily propulsive instrumental theme (carried by both high and low percussion, strings, and a variety of other instruments), which is juxtaposed against Bush's sometimes delicate and ethereal, but sometimes earthy and almost guttural vocals. The mix, obviously, features a lot of textures and tonalities being pushed forward at once, so it makes a formidable workout for any headphone.

The TrueFit 4's did a fine job with the track, starting with their ability to capture the deep, plunging "thwoomp" of the low percussion notes that set the song's pulse, while at the same time doing a good job with the sparkle and shimmer of high percussion accent notes. About the only thing lacking was that elusive, Nth degree of treble definition, focus, and openness that can—through the very best full-size headphones—let the sounds of the high percussion instruments take on a life of their own, with notes lingering on the air long after the instruments have been struck.

But what was really impressive was the way the Westones handled Bush's deceptively difficult-to-reproduce voice. The trick is that it is easy to overdo the upper register of her voices, as on the lead-in line of the song's chorus, where Bush soars up high to sing, "Whoooo's that girl?" But happily the Westones nailed this line, letting it soar without adding any overwrought edge of their own.

Later on, Bush works down into a lower register, belting out lines with a forceful touch of earthy grit as she sings, "Joanni, Joanni wears a golden cross/She looks so beautiful/With her armor on." On these lines, the Westones follow right along, revealing the surprising depth and punch of Bush's lower-pitched lines, but without lapsing into unwarranted rawness. My point, here, is that the TrueFit 4's engage the listener both with tonal qualities and with constantly shifting points of dynamic emphasis, in the process doing much to convey the life and energy of the music.

I got similarly good results when playing another revealing (and, in its way, sonically demanding) audiophile favorite; namely, "I Could Eat Your Words" from Patricia Barber's *Verse* [Blue Note]. While this track has been overused for audio demos, it is undeniably well recorded, and contains numerous rich sonic treasures—if your earphones are up to the task. The song opens with Barber's solo voice half-singing/half-speaking a measured introduction, with only open chords on a piano for accompaniment. It's an intimate moment (or at any rate is supposed to be), showing a lilting, delicate quality in Barber's voice that is perhaps not so clearly presented on many of her other recordings. The Westones did very nicely on these opening passages, beautifully rendering the softer and breathier qualities in Barber's voice, while letting the piano chords ring out and sustain, as they should.

But the whole personality of the song shifts gears as Barber sings, "...a teacher I want

you tonight," then adds after a brief, pregnant pause, "I could eat your words..." Once that line is launched, a growling and highly evocative acoustic bass line joins in, while Barber's voice takes on a noticeably darker, more overtly seductive, and sultry-sounding quality. What's interesting is the way that the bass serves as a both a rhythmic engine and as a "sea anchor" of sorts, holding the song on course while giving Barber's voice and piano the freedom to move forward in more adventurous, exploratory ways. The Westones really caught the energy, depth, textures, and gentle forcefulness of the bass, while also revealing the subtle, seductive shift in Barber's vocals and piano lines. But a special treat comes in the form of a haunting, plaintive trumpet solo that's presented about two-thirds of the way through the song. When that delicious moment arrives, the sound of the horn is incredibly exposed in the mix, and the Westone does it full justice, letting you hear the latent (but here carefully restrained) power inherent in the instrument, while also highlighting its darker, more somber qualities, which are at once jazzy-sounding, yet tinged with hints of melancholy.

As was the case with the Kate Bush track referenced above, the Westones did a very good but not quite great job with treble textures on "I Could Eat Your Words." Thus, the Westones let you clearly hear the sounds of the percussionist's brushes sweeping over the textured snare drum head, but they don't have the fullest measure of shimmer and high-frequency "air"—qualities that the more costly

Westone ES5 custom-fit monitors easily reveal. But this minor drawback notwithstanding, the TrueFit 4's gave an otherwise wonderfully accurate and emotionally engaging presentation on this song.

COMPETITIVE COMPARISON

To give reader an idea of how the TrueFit 4 stacks up against other top-tier universal-fit earphones, we provide a comparison to two of its nearest and strongest competitors: the Monster Turbine Pro Copper Edition and the Shure SE 535.

Westone TrueFit 4 vs. Monster Turbine Pro Copper Edition

- The MSRP of the TrueFit 4 is \$449, while the Copper Editions retail for somewhat less—\$399.99.
- The TrueFit 4 is a three-way, four-driver design, whereas the Copper Editions features a single, high-performance, full-range driver. Westone proponents might argue that the three-way design allows for driver specialization/optimization by frequency range, where Turbine Pro Copper Edition adherents contend that its single-driver design eliminates any possibility of driver-to-driver textural discontinuities. These arguments notwithstanding, the TrueFit 4 extracts a smooth, well-integrated sound from its multiple driver array.
- In terms of tonal balance, the two earphones essentially offer competing interpretations of sonic neutrality. In general, the Westone tends to sound slightly warmer, smoother

and more full-bodied, while the Copper Editions may at first seem slightly leaner-sounding, but with superior definition, a taut and well-controlled presentation, and excellent extension at both frequency extremes—especially in the upper treble region, where the Monsters can sound exceptionally lifelike (at least on good recordings).

- On the whole, the Westone emphasizes a smooth, natural, and unfailingly vibrant sound that is complemented by generous amounts of sonic detail and articulation. By comparison, the Monster tends to be more assertive and “up front” in reproducing subtle



transient sounds and low-level details—qualities that some listeners love, but others find a bit overbearing.

- The TrueFit 4 strikes a truly wonderful balance between smoothness, neutrality, and natural warmth on the one hand, while offering good extension, openness, detail, and articulation on the other. As I've mentioned above, the TrueFit 4's “secret weapon” is its uncannily vivid and vibrant sound, which keeps listeners coming back for more. By comparison, critical listeners may find the Copper Editions enjoy a narrow edge in terms of retrieving fine layers of low-level detail. Note, however, that the sound of the Copper Editions tends to be a double-edged sword of sorts. Some listeners enjoy the sense of heightened resolution and focus the Monsters convey, while others feel strongly that the Copper Editions impart almost “too much information” and thus impose an undesirably intense and potentially “clinical” listening experience. For those uncomfortable with the sound of the Copper Editions, the TrueFit 4 offers a still richly detailed but perhaps more livable compromise.
- Both earphones are compact and comfortable, and both come with a broad and useful array of eartips. I found the Westone's worked best (for me, but not necessarily for you) with their “bulb-shaped” soft rubber eartips, which are extremely comfortable. The Copper Editions, in turn, sounded best (again, for me) with their special Monster double-layer, gel-

type SuperTips. The catch, though, is that Monster's SuperTips sound terrific, but tend to feel a little stiff and thus can be tricky to fit—at least at first.

- What tips the comfort scales in favor of the Westones is their unusually comfortable over-the-ear cable routing and EPIC cable, which help to suppress noise that might otherwise be transmitted via the cable. By comparison, the Monster's signal cable is very beefy and sounds great (what else would you expect from Monster?), but tends to transmit some noise.
 - The TrueFit 4's carry Westone's 1-year warranty, while the Turbine Pro Copper Editions carry Monster's unbeatable “lifetime” warranty, which provides one-time free replacement of the phones “even if YOU break them.”

Westone TrueFit 4 vs. Shure SE535

- The MSRP of the TrueFit 4 is \$449, while the Shure's retail for considerably more—\$549.
- The TrueFit 4 is a three-way, four-driver design, while the SE535 is a two-way, three-driver design. Both earphones do a good job of smoothly integrating output from their multi-driver arrays, though I would say the TrueFit 4 achieves a more articulate sound overall.
- In terms of tonal balance the two models are fairly evenly matched, though I think the Westones achieve superior treble extension while still maintaining a desirable degree of treble smoothness. Both earphones offer a welcome touch of natural warmth (linked in

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both cases, I think, to a subtle touch of bass emphasis), but with the Shure exhibiting perhaps a touch more midrange emphasis.

- Both earphones emphasize a smooth, natural sound with decent (indeed generous) amounts of sonic detail, but I think the Westones achieve finer levels of overall resolution and transparency, with a top end that sounds noticeably more open and airy. But the Westone's sound is really defined and differentiated by its inherent qualities of sonic vividness and vibrancy, which really help bring the music to life.
- Both earphones are compact and comfortable, and both come with broad, useful array of eartips. The comfort factor contest is pretty much a draw; the TrueFit feature a well thought out earpiece shell design and Westone's cool EPIC signal cables, while the SE535's benefit from Shure's absolutely ingenious swiveling (and, please note, user-replaceable) signal cable design.
- The TrueFit 4's carry Westone's 1-year warranty, while the SE535's carry Shure's excellent 2-year warranty.

COMFORT FACTOR/ACCESSORIES

The Westone TrueFit 4's include the following accessories:

- Eartips: one pair of triple-flange tips, two pairs of compressible foam tips (sizes M and L), three pairs of "bulb-shaped" gray rubber tips (sizes S, M, and L), and three pairs of "bell-shaped" silicone tips.
- Cleaning tool.

- Line attenuator.
- 3.5mm mini-jack to 1/4" phone jack adapter.
- Sturdy fabric shell travel case with zipper closure and a patented Westone carabiner-style belt clip.

As discussed above, the TrueFit 4 is easy to handle, insert, and adjust thanks to the inherently ergonomic design of its earpiece shell (a design also shared with Westone's TrueFit 3 model). Not only is the TrueFit 4 comfortable to wear for long periods of time, but its design and EPIC cables also help to suppress noise that might otherwise be transmitted through the cable into the earpieces.

BOTTOM LINE

Westone's TrueFit 4 is very well balanced performer that does most things extremely well, and whose few performance compromises take the form of relatively minor sins of omission. This is without a doubt one of the finest universal-fit earphones on the planet, whose greatest strengths are an accurate and inherently vivid and vibrant sound.

For those unwilling or unable to take the plunge into the world of custom-fit in-ear monitors, the universal-fit TrueFit 4 may well be the next best thing.

Note, please, that spending some extra time trying various ear tips with the TrueFit 4 can pay huge sonic dividends. At least one Playback staffer has commended that, "getting the right fit with the TrueFit 4 can spell the difference between merely very good performance and truly great performance."

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