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AUDIO REVIEWS



JANUARY 2007



GRADO LABS GS-1000

Reviewer: Ryan Clarin

Source: Meridian G08

Amps: Eddie Current EC-SS, Eddie Current HD-25, Eddie Current Zane Deux

Headphones: 2 x Grado RS-1 (vintage with brown headband and current new production with black headband), Joe Grado HP-2, Sennheiser HD600 w/Cardas, Sennheiser HD650 w/Equinox

Cables: Chimera Labs Advantage Series II, BPT IC-SL, Enigma Audio Oenomel interconnect, BPT L-10 x2 (stock and shielded, both with upgraded Oyaides)

Power: BPT Pure Power Center strip outfitted with Oyaide outlets, Oyaide SWO-DX wall receptacle

Review Component Retail: \$995



About two years ago, I was on a plane. I recall a man wearing some Grado SR-60s. After comparing his headphones to the iBuds I was using with my iPod, I came to two conclusions. One, those were the coolest headphones I'd ever seen. Two, I had to get myself a pair. I remembered reading about Grados in an issue of Maxim magazine. It featured the RS-1s as one of their "coolest toys of the year". I also remember the shock I felt when I saw that price tag - \$695. I did not quite understand who would spend that much on headphones. But they sure looked sweet.

Shortly after encountering that man wearing those weird retro-looking cans on the airplane, I would seek to purchase my own. I found a nice little shop in downtown Evanston that allowed me to try out different Grados. I plugged in a set of SR-60s into my iPod and still remember vividly gasping at the stunning clarity, lack of distortion and great bass response, nothing of which I'd experienced before. Of course coming from the stock iBuds of my iPod and my beat-up set of Bose Triports, a lot of other cans would have given me a similar feeling. But it was the Grados which popped my cherry and something changed in me that day. Those Grados made me realize that better sound was possible. It was love at first sight. For \$69, it was probably one of the best investments I ever made.

My journey would eventually lead to HeadFi where I spent a lot of my free time researching and acquiring information towards achieving top

sound from headphones. The store that originally sold me the SR-60s had a very generous 3-month upgrade policy. You could exchange any given item for a full credit towards a higher model. I would eventually upgrade to a set of SR-80s... and then SR-225s... and then SR-325s. HeadFi clued me in to a subset of Grados known as Alessandros and I was able to pick up a set of MS-2s, based on the SR-325 but boasting a more open and linear response. The guys at the shop were good sports about my constant upgrading. I bet I wore my giddy heart on the sleeve the whole time I was in there. One guy even predicted that "at this rate, you're going to have the Grado RS-1s in no time."

Little did I realize that within a couple of months, on my birthday in fact, I *would* receive a set of RS-1s bought used from the HeadFi sale forums. The damage was done then. Not only was I officially a headphone connoisseur in pursuit of great sound, I also realized that I would be an official Grado man. The thing is, you either love Grados or you don't. All Grados (with the exception of the Joe Grado HP-1000s) share a similar house sound of placing the listener right on the stage with the musicians, creating a very upfront, dynamic and energetic presentation. Add in a tight impactful bass, great pace and timing, one of the best midranges in the business and you have an idea of what Grados are all about. Even though that sounds like a lot of love, cruising HeadFi shows a bit of hate too. Probably the biggest

complaint about Grados is comfort. The supra-aural nature of Grado cans creates direct pressure from the ear pad against the ears bypassing the outer pinna of the ear. Many find that uncomfortable. Grados can also be perceived as bright and aggressive due to a bit of upper midrange emphasis. However, we all hear things differently. One man's excitement is another man's aggressiveness.

The Joe Grado HP-1000s further complicate this issue because they place the listener farther back in the soundstage by a couple of rows, with a smoother tonal balance and a pretty neutral and linear frequency response due to their design purpose as recording monitors. The Grado RS-1s are the most refined of the John Grado cans, offering a bit more soundstage and air with a warmer tonal balance but still maintaining the entire current house signature. Don't even get me started on the special edition Grado PS-1s. They were made specifically for the German market at a price tag of \$1,400. They offer even more soundstage than the RS-1 and feature one of the most visceral and full bass responses of any headphones extant.

The Grado GS-1000 is John Grado's latest addition to the Grado headphone family. The new ear cushions and housings are completely different and the result of John & Co. going back to the drawing board and redesigning them from the ground up. This in turn has created a sound signature which I feel is *radically* different from the Grado house signature we have known and loved. The GS-1000 was premiered at the National HeadFi meet on April 22nd, 2006 in New York by John Grado himself. It appeared to be a huge hit among the meet participants, creating lots of buzz and excitement throughout the headphone community. Being a Grado lover myself, I was particularly interested in securing a GS-1000 for review. With the help of Todd Green at [Todd the Vinyl Junkie](#), I was able to receive a loaner set.

I had the pleasure of speaking with John Grado over the phone during the review period to ask what the initial motivation was in designing his new statement effort considering he already had the very popular and successful RS-1s. John felt that "headphone manufacturers were getting away from the hi-end". There had been a trend towards more budget-priced headphones that would sell in bulk rather than push the envelope with new technology and innovation. There used to be cutting-edge designs like the Sennheiser Orpheus, Sony R10s and AKG K1000s, but they were all discontinued now and even in their heydays very expensive luxury items, especially the Orpheus and R10. With the recent failure of the Qualia series and general lack of hi-end headphone sales within the audiophile community, John wanted to take a step in the right direction and counter this cheapening trend. Considering how Grado is a small company, John mentioned that the development process can be more laid-back, taking a longer trial and error process without investing too many funds in official R&D.

The first aspect of the GS-1000 to be worked out was the ear cushions. The GS-1000 features a significantly larger ear cushion with a circumaural fit as opposed to the smaller supra-aural cushions of all previous Grados. They are considerably bigger than the current Grado bowl-shaped pads and positively dwarf the original Grado flat pads. On HeadFi, these new 'uns have been cleverly labeled bagel pads. They wrap around the outer pinna and sport enough space around and to the ear to allow adjusting the placement of the cushion in reference to the ear canal to find the sweet spot that gives the best tonal and frequency balance for specific ears. John reconfirmed that the ear cushion has the biggest influence on the sound, especially the soundstage. One of the biggest complaints from Grado users has always been a perceived lack of soundstage width in reference to other headphones. It appears that the GS-1000 responds to some of those criticisms.



The next step was redesigning the housing. According to John, the housing was created to align with the ear cushion. Perusing Grado's lit, one reads about strategic resonance control, something the Wikipedia defines as "the tendency of a system to oscillate with high amplitude when excited by energy at a certain frequency. This frequency is known as the system's natural frequency of vibration, or resonant frequency." John used driving over a bridge as an example. The ensuing buzz that can be heard as the tires rub against the steel of the bridge has an actual pitch, signifying a major resonant frequency. John stated that "every material or part has a resonant frequency...and by blending, controlling and eliminating various resonant frequencies, you can reduce signal interference."

"Let's say you are connecting three pieces together. If you use screws to attach them, you'll end up with three different resonant frequencies. If you bond those pieces together, you create a joined composite with a single resonant frequency that's easier to control to reduce distortion." The GS-1000 enclosure is significantly larger than on the RS-1 but retains Mahogany as the material of choice.

Last but not least is the headphone driver itself about which John remained as tight-lipped as he has about previous drivers. However, it is clearly evident that the drivers have been tweaked and retuned in order to achieve the proper sonic balance with the new housing and ear cushion. If you change the ear pads of the GS-1000 to the original Grado flats or current bowl pads, the balance gets upset. The drivers move closer to the ear to boost bass response to the point of getting overwhelming, especially so with the flat pads. The soundstage narrows and is practically squashed with the flat pads. I found the sound acceptable with the bowl pads but clearly superior with the stock bagel pads.

The first thing that struck me about the GS-1000 was the comfort level. Grados have always been comfortable to me, including the HP-1000 with its all metal construction. I have read all the complaints and am glad that I am not afflicted with Grado comfort fatigue because I've got a big head. On that topic, the GS-1000 is one of the most comfortable headphones I have ever tried. The pads are soft and wrap nicely around the ear. They hardly exert any pressure against the ears and head. Previous supra-aural Grados used more pressure. I also find the GS-1000 more comfortable than the Sennheisers. Those have too much clamping force for my big head and the headband can't be bent back like the Grado headband. That means I am stuck with the extreme clamping force of the Senns. [Count me as another user who finds the Sennheisers annoyingly uncomfortable. I guess I suffer a big head too - Ed.]

Out of the box, the GS-1000s were very harsh especially on the top. They exhibited overwhelming bass response and the midrange felt very distant and foggy. I urge any potential buyers to demo a used set or take the time to run a minimum of 200 hours on these cans. The first thing to really get my attention then was the level of detail retrieval.

Various micro details within the recordings were brought to the foreground with a sense of focus and clarity that I am unaccustomed to. A rim shot here, a random conversation in the background there, various studio effects, musicians turning pages... they all had much more presence than my current reference, the Grado HP-1000. Some may argue that these are non-musical artifacts; others may argue that they are part of the recording and deserve to be heard. At times I did find them a little distracting. They seemed to be out of proportion with the actual musical material. This was very apparent with tape hiss, which a lot of my recordings possess. Within the past couple of months, I have been reading the Steve Hoffman boards more and more and am starting to develop a nice collection of recordings mastered by this acclaimed "audio restoration specialist" as he likes to refer to himself. These recordings are mastered with great attention and care from the original analog master tapes, with special attention to using minimal EQ and avoiding noise reduction. Hence tape hiss is present but so is that full-bodied and warm sound that was present *before* other remastering engineers ruined the experience through compression and liberal use of EQ and noise reduction. Even though this tape hiss is present, it really was brought to the fore with the GS-1000 and could detract from the musical experience at times.

In contrast, the HP-1000 appeared to focus more on the warm, full-bodied musical content. In the end, it boils down to the listener's preference and where they stand in the debate of accuracy vs. beauty. The GS-1000 is an amazingly detailed and accurate headphone but appears to lean more towards the accurate, detailed side of the fence. The bass was mighty impressive. It dug real deep, probably some of the deepest bass I have heard from a headphone and one of the best in the Grado line.

The RS-1 bass response is far punchier in the upper part of the bass but not as accurate as the GS-1000 to make it harder to hear way down low due to the upper bass prominence. The GS-1000 bass appears to go lower and sounds more at ease and tuneful at the extreme bottom. Sometimes the bass performance on the HP-1000 can be damped, whereas the GS-1000 renders it with much more body and weight. With the larger ear cushions and enclosures, it almost feels and sounds as though there was more actual air displacement. I have always felt that the German Grados matched the visceral quality of rock-solid hammering bass which good dynamic speakers have in spades. However, that bass could be overwhelming on various recordings and simply would become too much, dominating the rest of the balance and distracting from the whole presentation.

The RS-1 offer very punchy and dynamic bass response due to an audible upper bass hump but can sound bloated and fat with not enough low-bass extension. The GS-1000 combines what the other Grados have to offer in the nether region while adding an airier, more feathery quality to the general bass timbre. This was very apparent with upright bass on jazz and acoustic recordings. With pipe organ, you can actually feel that air rushing through the pipes. The lowest fundamentals are clearly heard and add the *physical* sensation, which the other models lack.



For me, the new "GS" might as well stand for "Grado with Soundstage". The huge soundstage with this can is what I feel truly makes the GS-1000 a statement product as well as contender for one of the best current-production cans on the market. The RS-1s with flat pads (I find them unlistenable with bowls) can go from front row to right on stage depending on the recording. The HP-1000s place the listener about 3 - 5 rows farther back, maintaining the upfront Grado perspective but adding some space and air. The GS-1000s place the listener at least 10 rows back. There is real depth to the soundscape.

I mentioned previously the GS-1000's amazing level of detail and resolution. This really helped ambiance and spatial cues. Using orchestral and symphonic albums recorded in real space, all of the little reverberations and echoes were distinctly heard. Not only does the apparent size of the soundscape seem to be the largest that Grado has yet offered from its current line, it matches the vastness of its sonic horizon with precise, focused imaging and clear separation between performers and a wide headstage. The separation and delineation between the performers is outstanding, besting any Grado so far.

The RS-1 soundstage is narrower and its apparent listening position so close that musicians and notes seem somewhat homogenized. The GS-1000s are vast and performers remain focused and separated from each other. The HP-1000 offers one of the widest headstages I have heard from a headphone, with sound clearly being heard from as far left to as far right as possible. Yet its soundstage sounds flat by comparison to the GS-1000.

The new headphone has a somewhat bright and analytical character which is in stark contrast to the darker tonal balance of previous Grados. In general, I had to listen at lower volumes than I'm used to. Certain recordings with lots of high frequency information such as hard cymbal crashes or guitar feedback could be quite brash and bright to the point where I would reach for the volume level to turn it down. The traditional warm balance of Grado appears to be slightly bleached with the GS-1000's emphasis on the frequency extremes especially in the treble.

Almost all Grados have a bit of a peak in this range that starts around the 1kHz mark and goes up to about 10kHz but with the GS-1000 it is more pronounced. The bagel pads offer some tuning. If you move the headphone forward, the sound gets brighter. Pushed back, it darkens but also diminishes the soundstage. Even though I would describe the GS-1000 as somewhat of a bright headphone, it doesn't veer as far into brightness as the Beyerdynamic DT880s or Sony SA5000s do.



While listening to the GS-1000s, at times I would miss the upfront and dynamic perspective from my RS-1s and HP-1000s. Grados have always been about midrange to me and their traditionally narrow stage usually puts all that midrange right in your face. Saxophones, voices and guitars sound lovely and are the reason why Grado is the rock headphone for a lot of people. The GS-1000 mids are not as full and bold as the RS-1 and HP-1000 and I found them somewhat recessed in the mix for my taste. John explained that "you can't have the huge soundstage and have it be upfront and aggressive at the same time." I still find the HP-1000 to offer the optimum balance of any Grado ever created.

System synergy is crucial to really allow the GS-1000s to shine. They are high resolution which paired with my Meridian G08 was a big reason why I was able to hear such a huge soundstage. Hooked up to my computer soundcard, the soundstage collapsed and the natural



brightness of the headphone was exacerbated even further, now possessing a layer of grain and veil that proved too distracting to really get into the music. I also was able to drive the GS-1000 through a few different amps, both tube and solid-state. I own the Eddie Current EC-SS, a solid-state offering, and the HD-25, a transformer-coupled tube amp with a single 6SN7 as input and a single 6AS7 as output, running single-ended class A1 with no feedback. I also was able to demo for an extended period Craig Uthus' new and amazing tube offering, the Zana Deux, a tube-rectified OTL design that runs a 6SL7 input and one 6C33C-B output tube per channel. Info can be found at [EddieCurrent](#).

The GS-1000 sounded great through all of the amps, with subtle differences between them. The EC-SS had a driving bass that really hit the chest, with an extended top end response that was smooth and actually not overly bright. The midrange was somewhat distant however. The HD-25 had a great deep soundstage and brought out the mids a bit but lacked the low end punch, depth and authority of the transistor unit. The top end was a bit ragged and some instruments had a slight veil to them. Craig had mentioned that the output iron was

good but not great to keep his amp's retail at \$595. There are some bandwidth issues as well as transformer overshoot and ringing. The GS-1000 gave audible indication thereof.

The Zana/GS-1000 pairing was absolutely heavenly and in addition to hearing it with my other Grados and Senns, I now believe that the Zana Deux is the best headphone amp I have heard so far. With the Zana, I heard a huge, deep and lush soundstage whose performers possessed an almost palpable quality. The Zana Deux offers a degree of musicality and continuousness that I have not heard before from a headphone amp to become a perfect match for the GS-1000. Not only did it build on the GS-1000's huge soundstage but it brought out the midrange which I did not get from the EC-SS or the HD-25.

The upper midrange/lower treble spike was lessened just enough that long-term listening fatigue was no longer an issue. The Zana matched the EC-SS pound for pound in bass extension, body and drive, but was able to offer tube OTL goodness that the EC-SS and HD-25 could only dream about. There is an obvious price difference between the three, with the Zana priced at \$1,900, the HD-25 at \$595 and the EC-SS at \$400.

The only other headphones that I compared the GS-1000 to were the Sennheiser HD-600 with Cardas cable and Sennheiser HD-650 with Equinox Cable. The Grado GS-1000 was superior to both in practically every area of sonics and musical enjoyment. The Grados bring excitement and an engaging musical quality to the table which point at the Sennheiser's Achilles heel of sounding distant, veiled and quite frankly boring (keep in mind that my ears have been tuned and thus biased to the Grado sound for a long time now). The GS-1000 bass response was superior to both models; it was deeper, tighter, more impactful and faster, with more groove and overall boogie factor. The midrange was more forward and engaging than the Senns and offered more detail and extension up top. Unlike previous Grados, the GS-1000 has as big a soundstage, yet sounds more natural and focused. I also found the GS-1000 far more comfortable than either of the Sennheisers, partly due to the fact that I wear a 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ " fitted hat. My noggin has a hard time dealing with the "Sennheiser clamp".



What should potential GS-1000 users be aware of? A rigorous burn-in process, a somewhat bright character that gives the headphone an overall analytical presentation, somewhat finicky placement in regards to exact placement of the headphone driver in relation to the ear canal, and a midrange that is not quite as forward and engaging as the previous efforts from Grado. In addition to the Sennheiser HD600 and HD650, I have heard practically all of the top offerings from each of those headphone companies, including the Beyer DT880, the AKG K1000 (discontinued) and K701, as well as the Sony SA5000 and R10 (discontinued). I find the GS-1000 the most enjoyable of them all. The GS-1000 is nowhere near as bright as the DT880, K1000 or SA5000. Its midrange is not as recessed and laid back as the K701 and offers a deeper and fuller bass response than the K1000 while matching its speed, clarity and focus and being much easier to drive. The R10 gives the GS-1000 a run for the money as it should considering its \$4000 original retail. The R10 has a midrange that is utterly amazing, seductive and luscious and really draws the listener into the music much more than the GS-1000. Yet the R10 lacks the bass response and is slightly brighter and more analytical than the GS-1000. The R10 was known for one of the biggest soundstages and widest headstages ever yet the GS-1000 trails it very closely.

The heaviest criticism on the GS-1000s will most likely come from current Grado lovers. I can definitely see how someone loving the Prestige or Reference Series may not quite understand the radical departure the GS-1000 represents. For those traditional Grado diehards, I urge to audition the GS-1000 to appreciate the new qualities which John Grado has brought to the table. From there, you can decide whether the GS-1000 is truly an upgrade from the RS-1 or a lateral move. Considering that the RS-1 has been an overall success and staple entry in *best of* lists for headphone hifi, the fact that John had the initiative and willingness to create something new and different that might appeal to users previously unconvinced by the *Grado Sound* took a lot of gumption and should be applauded.

Hopefully other headphone companies take note of the fact that a little risk and willingness to develop headphones beyond cheap budget throwaways can truly become successful endeavors for all involved. Hopefully headphone users will have more hi-end options to choose from in the future. The new Grado GS-1000s are a statement option which now belong on the short list up there on the top...



Ryan Clarin

Manufacturer's [website](#)

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