



Bose

QC3 Acoustic Noise Cancelling Headphones

To the best of my knowledge, Bose was the second manufacturer to release active noise-cancelling (ANC) headphones to the consumer market, shortly after Sennheiser. However, Bose had been building noise-cancelling headphones for aircraft pilots for many years previously, so it's certainly entitled to cry 'we wuz first!' should it be so inclined. My point is simply that the company has had more experience building noise-cancelling headphones than all the Johnny-come-late-lies that are now populating the market.

The QC3

The QC3s (the QC stands for 'Quiet Comfort' not 'Quality Control!') come with a zip-up (semi) hard-case that not only protects them when you are travelling, but also houses some of the many accessories provided with the headphones. When you check out these accessories, you will discover that Bose has thoroughly researched its market, because all are concerned with making sure that you can plug the Bose headphones into any aircraft entertainment system and that you can recharge the QC3's battery from mains socket in any country in the world.

So far as hooking into a plane's entertainment system is concerned, Bose has been quite clever, because with just two plugs (one of which has a folding arm) it has managed to cover the three systems in use by the majority of the world's major airlines. This is a lot better than it manages with the 240V charger, which needs six different adaptors to cover the different mains plug standards used around the world... but that's hardly Bose's fault!

Voltage and mains frequency aren't a problem: any voltage between 100 and 240volts will do, at either 50 or 60Hz.

As for the need for a battery at all, Bose is the only manufacturer of noise-cancelling headphones of which I am aware that requires a charged battery if you're even to listen to music. That is, the QC3s will not work at all without a charged battery, even if you are not using the active noise cancelling circuitry. (Other ANC headphones lose their cancellation ability when their batteries run flat, but will still allow you to continue to use them as ordinary headphones.) The battery itself is a custom Li-Ion type, with a 200mAH rating that Bose says will keep the headphones powered-up and running for at least 20 hours. When I say 'custom' I mean *custom*, because it's semi-circular, with clips that allow it to snap into a recess on the top of the right ear-piece, as well as into a similar recess in the 240V charger. Bose thoughtfully provides a spare battery, so if your flight lasts longer than 20 hours, you can swap batteries mid-flight. And with most modern planes now providing power sockets (albeit primarily intended for computer use) you can easily recharge the other battery while you're in the air. That said, the Bose battery is so small (it's about the same size as the tip of my index finger) that it's pretty easy to lose, and if there is no Bose store handy, you'll have Buckley's chance of obtaining a quick replacement.

From what I can tell, the QC3s are functionally identical to the Bose's QC2 noise-cancelling headphones, except that the QC2s have larger ear-cups that totally enclose your

ear, whereas the QC3s have ear 'pads' that sit on top of the ear. I personally think the QC2 headphones are more comfortable than these newer QC3s, and I also think the larger ear-cups of the QC2 allow marginally more 'passive' noise reduction than the QC3s. However, I'd be the first to admit that the QC2s are much larger and visually far more obtrusive than the QC3s. (Also on the 'plus' side for the QC2s is that they take a standard AAA battery). However, when I say 'functionally identical' I found that the active noise cancellation circuitry in the QC3s seemed superior to that of the QC2s—something I found somewhat surprising. Surely if Bose has a superior ANC circuit available, it would use it in both the QC2s and the QC3s, particularly since the actual cost of the ANC circuit would be an incredibly small percentage of the total cost of construction, and that both models command premium prices? (*Editor's Note: I subsequently asked Newport Test Labs to test this, and it reported that the ANC circuitry in the QC3s provided around 3–5dB more attenuation than the ANC circuitry in the QC2s.*)

In Use

I used the QC3s around my home and in my car for several weeks, followed by two 10-hour flights to and from Australia, after which I followed up with a couple of 30-minute train journeys. I have to say that I was impressed. I easily got through both 10-hour flights, plus the train journeys, on a single battery (so I needn't have packed the spare battery or the charger for the overseas trip!) and the level of noise reduction the QC3s delivered

was astonishing. Listening in the quiet of my own home, I was impressed that there didn't seem to be the same level of background 'hiss' I'd previously experienced with all NC headphones—and most particularly with the original Bose QuietComfort model, which has long since been discontinued. My personal opinion is that the audio quality of the QC3s still can't match it with high-quality conventional headphones from AKG, Beyerdynamic, Stax, Sennheiser and the like but then again, none of those conventional models offers active noise cancellation.

On my overseas jaunt with the QC3s I become quite annoyed with the QC3 case, because I was constantly having to jam the earpieces into the recesses provided, I could never get the headband to fit neatly where it was obviously supposed to go, and there was no dedicated recess for even one of the many 240V pin assemblies used by the charger. Also, the separate recessed place inside the case provided for the headphone cord (which is completely detachable) didn't hold it in place securely, so I ended up putting it in the soft 'webbing' at the rear of the case. I was impressed that, by accident or design, the tag of the zipper can be tucked into the ring that supports the case's arm strap, completely preventing accidental zip-pulls that might otherwise tip the contents of the case onto the ground. It was only after I'd returned and was in the throes of preparing to write this review that I finally discovered that the top part of the inside of the Bose case was secured only by Velcro and that by removing it, you can create a much larger compartment that will easily store the cable, adaptors, charger and all six of the 240V pin assemblies. (If you do this yourself—and I recommend you do!—I need to warn you that although the construction of the bottom half of the case appears to be the same as that of the top, the bottom half is stuck to the case with glue, not Velcro, so don't try to remove it!)

It's worth noting that having a completely

detachable headphone cord is a tremendous advantage when travelling. What I really liked is that it makes it easier to wear the headphones while you're sleeping in the plane, and means that if you need to get up in the middle of the night, you don't have to traipse down the aisle in the dark trailing a length of headphone cord. (And no, I never leave my headphones on my airplane seat while I'm elsewhere in the plane—I lost a perfectly good pair of noise-cancelling headphones when my travelling companion sat on them one night while I was away from my seat!) From a commuting point of view, the ability to remove the cord completely means you can wear the headphones simply for noise reduction, without the nuisance of a cord. Finally, from a practical point of view, you can't damage the headphones by accidentally catching the cord on something (because the cord will simply disconnect from the headphones), and if the cord does become damaged, it's easy and cheap to replace—something that can't be said of headphones whose cords are permanently attached.

Conclusion

Dedicated active noise-cancelling headphone fanatic that I am, I would be the first to say that if you're looking for headphones simply for home use, you'll get better performance—and much better value-for-money—if you purchase a pair of ordinary passive headphones. However, if you're a frequent flier, (and you're not up at the pointy end of the plane, where I hear tell they hand out active noise cancelling headsets as part of the service) my opinion is that active noise cancelling headphones are God's gift to air travel. They're certainly an indispensable part of my travel kit. With my ANC headphones on, I can hear the in-flight entertainment systems far more clearly (particularly the movies), I sleep better during the flight, and I arrive at my destination much calmer and refreshed, I presume by virtue of not having to endure

the constant noise of the jet engines and the air-flow outside the fuselage.

Which ones should you buy? Well obviously the Bose QC3s are a candidate, and I'd be happy to recommend them to anyone, but you do need to consider a few issues of a personal nature, and I won't bother discussing price, because this is blindingly obvious! Comfort is certainly important, because if the headphones aren't comfortable, you won't enjoy wearing them. So try different pairs, and remember that since you'll likely be sleeping in them, to rest your head against a chair while you're actually wearing them, and pretend you're sleeping in an airplane seat. Battery life is an issue too. Although I found my own QC2s more comfortable than the newer QC3s, I was really, *really*, impressed by the life of the QC3's battery, which meant that for the first time ever, I didn't need to carry spares or a charger. How small the headphones pack up is yet another issue: the QC3s, for example, pack more compactly than the QC2s, which is always important as you'll be carrying them as hand luggage, but both models are large compared to some other ANC headphones, particularly the in-ear models sold by Sennheiser and Sony. Noise reduction is of course important, but this can be difficult to judge if you're not actually on a plane at the time. My advice is to find the store's air-conditioner and use this to assess the relative noise reduction capabilities of the various pairs of headphones you're comparing. And if for any reason you can't get a handle on the noise reduction capability, I'd advise not sweating it too much, because although the degree of noise reduction does vary from brand to brand—and from model to model within the same brand!—my experience is that all models will remove sufficient external noise to make them 'suitable for the purpose'—and that you will likely be better served by making your buying decisions primarily using the many other—more easily assessable—variables between different models. —*Jutta Dziwnik*



- Good noise reduction
- Great accessories
- Small and neat



- Non-standard battery
- Carry case
- On-ear design

Bose QC3 ANC Headphones

Brand: Bose
Model: QC3 ANC Headphones
Category: Active Noise Cancelling Headphones
RRP: \$599
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