

The Shure \$50 SE112 Earphones: What You Can Expect

An Interview With Sean Sullivan



SE112 Sound Isolating Earphones

There isn't one of us who doesn't have a tangled pair of low-end earphones in a gym bag, coat pocket or buried next to the I-PASS tollway transponder somewhere in the glove compartment under a crumpled pile of fast food napkins. The chances are pretty good, too, that at least one pair hasn't worked for months and will eventually end up in the trash bin just like all the others that came packaged with various MP3 players over the years.



Look familiar?

We tend to think of them as disposable. Because they're lost or replaced from time to time (regularly if teenagers are involved), it's hard to justify spending a hundred dollars or considerably more for an upgrade. But with 'premium' earphones and headphones sporting the brands of rappers, hip-hop artists and even bands like Motörhead, the times they are a-changin'. The Consumer Electronics Association estimated that 79 million headphones were sold in 2012 with an expected increase of 10% in 2013. Most of that growth was expected to occur in the over \$100 category.

We love our mobile devices. More and more, we rely on them for information and entertainment, whether we're watching the last season of *Homeland* on a tablet or checking out music videos on a smartphone while we're waiting for a friend. High definition displays, offering the same resolution on a mobile device as your living room TV, are the norm. So is sound quality.

That's where Shure enters the picture, but first... a little bit of Shure earphone history: Shure's first earphone products were introduced over ten years ago when the company noticed that musicians were using the E Series earphones included with its **professional** in-ear personal monitoring systems for **personal** listening. Back then, the entry-level pair designed for personal listening was the E2 with a \$99 price tag. Since then, the line has expanded to include multiple models, including the uber-premium, tunable SE846 Sound Isolating™ Earphones that top the line and the price list at a not-for-everyone \$999.

Now, Shure has a new earphone in the SE Model Series: SE112 at \$49. What we wanted to know was what we could expect from the bargain-priced model. Or any entry-level pair.

Product Manager Sean Sullivan agreed to advance our understanding.

***Another* earphone model?**

Cheryl Jennison DaProza **With the SE112, there are now six different models in the SE line. Wasn't five enough?**

Sean Sullivan The SE112 is the first earphone we've ever sold for under \$100, making it the most affordable earphone in our line. We've had a premium place in the earphone market with a very strong brand for many years, and we're proud of that, but we've always wanted to offer a really affordable earphone that still meets our quality standards. There's a lot of development that goes into our products – earphones are no exception – and that means they're not inexpensive to manufacture. So that was a challenge.

CJD **The next earphone in line to the SE112 is the SE215. How does the SE112 differ from that one?**

SS The SE112 brings back the same form factor and technology that we used in our popular SE115 earphones. We discontinued that model several years ago when we introduced our current \$99 product, the SE215. By launching SE215, we brought to market a \$99 product with high-end features to help distinguish it from the crowded \$99 market space. This

included a new low-profile ergonomic design with fit and comfort almost identical to the premium-priced earphones we were offering at the time. We also added a detachable cable, another feature of the premium SE models.

CJD The benefit there is ...

SS ... that the majority of the cost of an earphone, of course, is in the internal mechanics of the earphone itself. But the cable is four feet of very flexible material that, even with careful use, is going to fail eventually. That's true of any type of cable, whether it's for earphones, headphones, microphones or even a guitar cable. The constant bending and coiling will cause it to fail.

CJD Are the SE112s designed for a specific use? Personal listening versus gaming, for instance?

SS Neither, actually. All of our earphones have been designed and tested for quality standards to live up to the rigors of live performance: traditionally pretty hard usage. So we make sure that all of our tests are designed to replicate that. They're all designed with the thought that they'll be used onstage with our in-ear personal monitors. That's where we started out.

Cable Questions

CJD Seems like one or both channels in lower-end earphones eventually stop working. Is that a cable problem?

SS Normally if an earphone is going to go, if something stops making sound, it's usually an electrical (cable/wiring) issue and not a failure in the driver. If the driver failed, typically it wouldn't just stop. The sound quality would be compromised.

When a customer is making a significant investment in our products, we don't want that weak link to render it useless. With the exception of the SE112, all of our earphones have detachable cables to guarantee many, many years of use.

CJD Why doesn't the SE112 have a detachable cable?

SS That detachability feature is expensive to manufacture, so we weren't able to offer it on the SE112 at the \$49 price point. We were, though, able to keep features that will maintain high performance like excellent sound isolation and comfort, Shure durability, and great sound quality.

CJD What should we be looking for in a super-affordable pair of earphones? Most experts seem to agree that the considerations include fit, price, sound quality, and durability.

SS Customers should also make sure that the company is going to stand behind the product, that it has a great track record for audio performance and that the features aren't just gimmicks.

There are so many low-cost earphones that are available just about everywhere that it's hard to find a reliable and trusted brand. With the SE112, customers get the strength of the Shure brand and can expect excellent performance and great durability.

That's the hardest part about buying something that's price-competitive in any part of the electronics world, whether it's a DVD player, a flat screen television or a pair of earphones. You want a brand that you can trust.

CJD It's what pushes us to choose the leading brand over the no-name import.

SS That's exactly right.

What about the bass?

CJD We were just talking about gimmicks. I know how Chief Engineer Yuri Shulman who designed the headphone line feels about this, but I have to ask you. Is there a bass boost on the SE112?

SS No, there isn't. That's traditionally something that you find on a CD player, an amplifier, a boom box, or something like that. The SE112 is like all of our other earphone/headphone products: a passive thing. A boost implies that it's adding some kind of electronic gain in the low end. That's a gimmick that a lot of companies use. They offer a huge bass, but so often an exaggerated bass level means poor overall tonal balance.

The SE112 uses a single dynamic driver that we could have shaped or tuned so that the bass is bigger, but if you overdo it, you can really start sacrificing the clarity and the detail. The challenge of tuning an earphone is to make sure that it maintains a decent balance across the entire frequency spectrum rather than just making something bassy. The sound signature of the SE112 has plenty of low end, but our goal is to create a well-balanced earphone.

Fit, Comfort, and Isolation

CJD **Most earphones in this price range are going to be Sound Isolating™ like earphones like the ones Shure makes. Since fit is so crucial in getting a good seal and great sound, what kind of features are important here?**

SS SE112 comes with 3 sizes of silicon sleeves that fit a wide range of ears. Comfort and a good fit is critical to the listening experience. One size does not fit all. The SE112 has also been designed with a cable that can be worn over the ear.

CJD **Will it help to keep the earphone from falling out of my ear when I'm running?**

SS Absolutely. And while the rest of the SE earphone line is optimized for wearing the cable over the ear, the SE112 can also be worn straight down rather than over the ear. That's something that makes the SE112 very versatile for more casual use.



SE112s can be worn one of two ways

Care and Maintenance

CJD What can people do to make earphones last longer? Do you have any tips for keeping a pair of earphones working better or longer?

SS It really comes down to care.

To prolong the life of earphones, take care of the cable. That means not throwing them on the dashboard, stepping on them in the gym or pulling on the cord to remove the earphones from a mobile device.

When you're not using them, wrap the cable loosely. The sharp corners of devices that people wrap them around will eventually damage them.

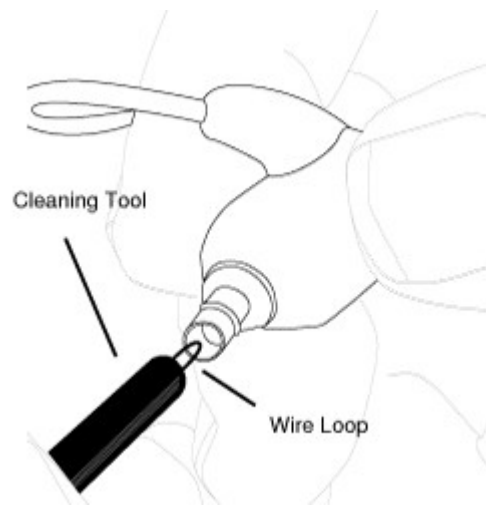
I'm a sound guy and a musician, and I'd love to find cables that will never fail, but that's not going to happen. The longer the cable, the more important it is to wrap it properly. The longer it gets, the more twists you're going to have.

I wrap my earphone cables in a loop that's about 4" in diameter. I make sure that the cable is as straight as possible near the flex reliefs at the connector and the Y junction where the cables split into two.



Always wrap your cables loosely

Make sure that the earphone stays clean. As much as people want to believe that they don't have earwax or debris in their ears, they do. Over time, it can collect in the nozzle and completely clog them. The SE112 comes with a Nozzle Cleaning Tool, which is just a little plastic piece with a wire loop on the end of it.



Make sure to keep your earphones clean!